Research and Praxis for Social Engaged Arts Education in Southern Europe, Balkan and Mediterranean countries

Introduction

Why did we start InSEA seminars and how did it work?

The world of art education has been concerned with the ongoing global issues such as poverty, climate change, cultural diversity, inclusion, migration, political radicalization, marginalization, artificial intelligence, digitalization, posthumanism, eco-justice and post-colonialism. Although the field has been established as important subjects of school curriculum, the advocacy endeavors continue to take place all over the world. The advocacy attempts stem from the global financial crisis that threatens the funding for education, as well as the accountability that is connected with the market jeopardize the significance of the skills that an individual may develop when they engage in art practices. Eventually along with the advocacy attempts, a new interest arises for the usage of arts as a therapeutic and integration tool in marginalized communities (e.g. poor, immigrants, refugee communities). Also, an increased need rises about how education and arts education may support the cohesion of the society over the political radicalization.

Therefore art educators and other cultural workers are seeking for alternative modes of critique and collective action through the arts. This publication is an outcome of the InSEA seminar held during 16-18 July 2018 at the School of Early Childhood Education, Aristotle University in Thessaloniki, Greece. The roots for this seminar can be traced in events and actions created by art educators, artists and researchers from countries in the peripheral western south coast of Europe: The Iberian Peninsula, where the survival kit for art education was created by the members of the activist art education group C3. The group C3, coordinated by Cristina Trigo and Mª Jesús Agra-Pardiñas is an educational and artistic resistance cell proposing alternative ways for research and praxis in art education. The survival kit presented in the European InSEA congress in Lisbon 2015 suggested a slow pace way of living, promoting pauses and the creation of spaces to think/feel, to slow down, to restrain, and to make. The idea to start InSEA seminars followed the same logic: we wanted to create a possibility for encounters where art educators can be together, share their practices, inspire each other, and initiate conversations by making things together. Spaciousness was the main flavor of the event - we tried to offer not only counter-narrative to linear and goal oriented passes of time, but to create fertile intervals that sometimes provoke confusion, but also can be a potential for play, creation and learning.

Furthermore, it became a common sense to claim that knowledge production is certainly not neutral - the process is instilled with norms and values, which are being passed on through academic action. It is based on epistemologies that seek to confirm western hegemonic structures (Thielsch, 2019). Within the European framework, knowledge production is taking place in the “centres of Europe” reflecting the existing imbalance of power between East and West, North and South. What is considered to be socially engaged art education among scholars is often based on Western European concepts such as relational aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002) which is considered as a door-opener for community participation, collaboration and collective actions. The purposes of such efforts mirror the main European
values – participation, diversity, civic engagement and democracy, and socially engaged artistic practices are seeing as a possible catalyst for change, although sometimes being very costly and elitist projects. Furthermore, different events within the academic context are happening inside the logic of hegemonic knowledge production, and often they reproduce inequalities and confirm imaginary differences between European center and periphery. Not forgetting the relevance of symbolic realm, this is also a consequence of the huge disparity in available resources and support that academics and students receive within their context. Certainly, there are efforts to transcend those divisions by suggesting different conference fees for different countries depending on their GDPs, or offering bursaries for PhD students. Still, these measures did not manage to overcome inequalities and those events where discourses are produced and reproduced are still dominated by Western European institutions. As the organizations of the academic conferences is a very expensive endeavor, big events often take place in developed countries, making it even more unattainable to “the periphery”.

After the financial crisis hit Europe, austerity measures were introduced to Southern countries and their image was constructed as a kind of a teenager who was incapable of taking good care of the future, recklessly spending money guided by the principle of instant gratification. These European children were seen as “unable to organize their lives democratically without guidance from another” (Buden [2009] in Petrović, 2014, p. 10). The somewhat infantilized representational position, transforms these geographical areas into objects of knowledge production. “The role of the periphery is to supply data, and later to apply knowledge in the form of technology and method. The role of the metropole, as well as producing data, is to collate and process data, producing theory (including methodology) and developing applications which are later exported to the periphery” (Connell, 2014, p. 211). The Balkan region specifically is constructed as a field of study: Yugoslav studies, post-communist studies, post-conflict etc., thus making a geographical area into a research one without agency.

Other European countries can also be part of the peripheral map, specially when we talk about art education. Models of cultural agency, education and art education coming from North Europe and North America had been a great influence upon curriculum development, teacher training and research in art education. The global art education landscape is characterized by the centrality and certain invisibility of geographically marginal practices and knowledge mainly because of the dissemination of academic publications in English language in journals with high impact factor, texts that are largely distributed in universities. A rush for number of quotations and publications with ‘impact factor’ is undermining the universities; carrying out a multinational business model of distributing information. Maybe is time to start to react against the model.

Another interesting factor is related to the places and types of congresses and conferences art education researchers use to attend. Normally in universities of Northern countries with very traditional formats of displaying information such as lectures by keynote speakers, presentations by participants and some workshops. Even if in the InSEA European congresses from the last eight years we can observe a move to more dialogic formats, we still need to enlarge the focus, the scope and the places.

We urge to consider how academic praxis and intellectual work produces place and what kind of critical-creative endeavor is needed as a counter action. Therefore, we see the seminar Research and practice of socially engaged art education as a proactive response to hegemonic knowledge production as we tried to take into account social, political and geographical context of knowledge making, talking, and writing. The seminar took place in Thessaloniki with the
attempt to create space for gathering and sharing that was organized beyond regular conference logic that follows rigid structure. The model of the seminar was dialogical and non-hierarchical, including interactive sessions where everyone had an active role, workshops and performances reminded us the crucial role of the body interaction in communication. Making things together, walking together, performing together removed participants from their comfort zones of written and spoken languages creating spaces for emotional conversations. Due to the small size of the seminar the dialogue was fruitful and everyone got connected overcoming linguistic difficulties and cultural differences. In the difference we reached connections and constructed links. We were able to be attentive to the small details, to perceive the subtle varieties of art education in its many forms and contexts, without judging from the academic gaze, but trying to understand through the slow pace of making together the small nodes of collective actions.

‘As long Thessaloniki exists; everyone will have a homeland’ wrote the Byzantine scholar Nikiphoros Choummos in 14th century. The majority of the participants came from Balkan and Mediterranean regions, but the seminar in Thessaloniki also welcomed people from some Northern European countries, Brazil and Japan. The InSEA seminar took place at a crossroads of social transformation throughout history. Since ancient time Thessaloniki invited and offered shelter to many different groups and communities that eventually flourished. As a consequence these circumstances gave prominence to the significance of its location. In our days, Thessaloniki is still a solidarity center even if it has suffered from the contemporary financial crisis. The topic and content of the seminar was a response to a contemporary need for collaboration and creative exchange in Balkan and Southern Europe in order to foster interdependence of the several communities and prevent hostility.

Why socially engaged art education?

Contemporary artists have been eliminating the boundaries between the arts and the audience, creating relational forms for human communication and knowledge construction. They opened up completely different perspectives on levels of interaction between things and people proposing diverse roles for the arts in the society and providing tools that can be most useful in educational settings involving image, sound and movement as ways of knowing and interconnecting people. Globalization phenomenon caused a sense of fragmentation, loss of social bonds and alienation in many population groups in the world. Engaged artists believe that close working relationships among artists, arts organizations, and the broader community enable better living conditions for all and create a more sustainable environment for the arts, claiming a return to a social function of the arts and a non compromised role of the artist in the society. Some cultural workers point out the need to merge art in collective experiences often performative and political. Activist movements are growing in all the continents, raising critical interventions, provoking situations and creating collective situations to raise urgent issues and polemical questions that are often hidden by the hegemonic media discourses. In its many variations, such as “relational art,” “participatory art,” “community art,” or “socially engaged art,” these manifestations often facilitate collective situations and promote greater participation and cultural agency (Emmelhainz, 2016).

Socially engaged arts education (SEAE) began as a pedagogical direction which purposes the civil engagement of participants. Whether it takes place in educational institutions or in the community, the evaluation of the projects depends on the ethical responsibility on the social concerns that the members of the action undertaken. In educational settings and especially in
public schools the aim is to shape the students’ civic role. Arts are seen as a means to enrich the experience of the participants with playful and creative ways. Yet, the interdisciplinary character of the SEAE is obvious in order to foster a dialogue and a direct social change. Whether this is only a short-term change, marking the difference with the goals of traditional politicized art, or a more enduring and influencing process, time will tell (Emmelhainz, 2013). The processes usually include collaborative and interdependent activities that make visible the individual perspectives and how the location affects the critical responses and thinking. As a consequence a sense of “community” is created through the elimination of conflicts that the SEAE evoked. Further, SEAE evokes a radical reappraisal of the modes, purposes and context of arts education. Schlemmer (2017) draws the pedagogical implications of Socially Engaged Art practice that foster a hybridized space beyond formal instructions. Art practice is encountered as an educational experience and vice versa. The critical and reflective actions as perquisites of an educational space become traits of art practices that are formed through an aesthetic process.

The participants

The seminar attracted many valuable contributions, also from other regions than the Balkan and the Mediterranean regions, but the majority of the articles submitted for this publication were from the latter. The focus on the Balkan and Southern European countries in this seminar gave space to certain topics to appear in the fertile intervals. Some might also appear in other places, others are site-specific.

Public space is seized by art education, stimulating energies and possibilities that sprout from the locations and, if needed, giving people alternatives to respond to a dominant way in which space is organized. In Czech Republic the grassroots art association Trafalga (2006-2014) initiated street art activities for young people and worked together with teachers to pass on techniques. This led to the new concept of ‘Public Pedagogy’, as noticed by Kamila Karagavrilidová. In Serbia installations in the form of windows or portals were put in public space inviting people to paint their vision. Jelena Joksimovic explains that the aim is to express and then combine different feelings and understandings of educational practices. Vanja Zarić and other students of adult education at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade reveal that socially engaged art in liminal spaces has a great potential to initiate the transformation of individuals through the processes of participation and learning, as well as social practice and reality itself.

The senses play traditionally an important role in art education and in the Thessaloniki seminar the use of senses was stimulated in a specific way. They caused individuals to be more aware of the body and its surroundings. Antonio Félix Vico Prieto presents the idea of “turning vision into sound” which involves a technique of recording audio that reproduces the real conditions of human hearing, to show how a visual image may be transformed into a soundscape. María Lorena Cueva Ramírez presents ‘My hands tell you’, a practical proposal to work with hands, gestures and paint to get the message across. Her workshop has benefit from the cultural and linguistic diversity of the participants. Without oral language they are able to communicate messages, concepts or sensations to other people only using colors and hands. Another way of communicating without speech was developed by María-Isabel Moreno-Montoro, María Martínez-Morales and Nuria López-Pérez, in a system of body expressions. Ideograms that represent concepts are proposed in a performative act with a technical basis of action and documentary recording. Also Katia Pangrazzi shows art as a common language in the project ‘Art
Lab x Kids’. The project was developed in Italy but the aim is to create a "travelling place" of creativity and knowledge, experimentation, discovery and learning through play. It is a place for educational meetings, training and collaboration. A space to develop the ability to observe with eyes and hands and to learn to experience reality with all the senses.

Myriam Romero Sánchez, reviews the dualism of standardized and real beauty and explores its socio-cultural consequences. She makes a distinction between divergent bodies and convergent bodies and then she explores those typologies with a large installation with an empty face in which the participants may temporarily transform. Melissa Lima Caminha uses embodied inquiry that is based on feminist and queer theories in order to uncover perspectives of the social construction of gender and sexuality. Combining video and photography with drawing made it possible for María de la Paz Barrios Mudarra to carry out artistic investigation of daily experience. With those means, sensations you have while doing routine actions in your house can be intensified as in the work ‘Invisible Woman’ is shown.

The artistic, nature, ecology and the social came together in new projects in Spain and Brazil. Carmen Andreu-Lara, and Rocío Arregui-Pradas describe a new Masters degree of Art at the University of Seville intertwining ecology, art and social contexts, as in the concept of ‘ecosophy’ by Guattari. The authors acknowledged the connections created by Spanish, Moroccan and Latin-American students in their curriculum. In Brazil Rosana Gonçalves da Silva also involves ecology in social contexts of learning - a tripolar process of self-learning, learning from others and learning from the earth expressed in Poetic language to raise the principles of the Earth Charter. In a public elementary school located in Brasília she developed an experience of artistic ecoeducation/ecoformation and sensitive experience in school routine.

In Cyprus and Greece, socially engaged art education is also about war and refugees. Spyros Koutis started his artistic research dealing with war from a personal question: what is my responsibility as an artist in regard to war? With use of ‘Agnostic arts practice’, a form of arts based research, which explores the potential of art to have political impact through process of disruption, subversion, and participation, he developed socially engaged art projects-workshops related to Syrian war and refugees. He carried out the projects with children at a primary school and with young adults at the Birmingham City University.

Martha Christopoulou describes the project “depictions of a refugee’s journey” which aimed at (i) enabling primary school students to critically assess information provided by the mass media (ii) enhancing their understanding of empathy and (iii) increasing compassion and empathic behaviour towards distant strangers who face extreme circumstances in their lives. All the students that participated in this project managed to locate, identify and label the different facets of migrant-refugee crisis, in a way that was meaningful for them.

Cultural regional traditions often are defended in war contexts with different population groups. In this seminar very interesting art educational projects were organized concerning local community and cultural traditions. Maria Letsiou describes socially engaged art education (SEAE) in which the primary goal of art learning is students' involvement with the community's concerns and issues. She delineates how studio-oriented learning is enriched by the collaborative learning experience and by students' meaningful participation in the process and content of learning. Antonia Batzoglou describes practical applications of the praxis of Mythagogia: an interdisciplinary praxis that draws from mythology, the educational art of psychagogia, as defined by Socrates, and the therapeutic and reflective qualities of performative storytelling. Socrates describes psychagogia as the educational art of leading the psyche towards dialectical examination of the good. In mythagogia, myths are the tools that
engage an embodied experience and dialectical reflection of social and personal themes. Ismini Sakellariadi presents the results of a project carried out by 15-year old students of the Experimental School of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, who used art to research and communicate a new understanding of their cultural identity and history. They looked at the way the past permeates the present in various ways, studied the multicultural past of their city and discovered untold stories. They then proceeded to communicate their artwork and their findings with the wider community, hoping to help bring about change in attitudes and beliefs regarding history, identity, minorities, multicultural symbiosis, human rights and social justice.

Conclusions and recommendations

Some of the topics, or parts of them, that appeared in this seminar, could also be discussed in Western-European conferences. But the focus on Balkan and Southern-European countries shed a light to different aspects. This publication brings up so many voices, different tunes, different colors but the same concern: education through art, an approach to arts in education that although old - Herbert Read seminal book ‘Education Through Art’ was published in 1943 - is still relevant. More than ever we need to believe in the power of the arts as a tool for making collective actions, as a pedagogical strategy to enable cultural participatory skills. Maybe we are witnessing a recession of arts in schools, we see that art education is not as valued as it was in the twenty century. But through the voices and stories of this book we can look further and embrace the different places where education may be art and art may became education.

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In the face of war, the artists must make art that impacts us and wakes us from our indifference. Do you agree? If the answer is positive; can art do it; and how could an artist do it?
Spyros Koutis

“Depictions of a refugee’s journey”: Emphasizing empathy in the primary art curriculum
Martha Christopoulou

Rethinking the Notion of Art Learning as a Social Activity
Maria Letsiou

MYTHAGOGIA
Antonia [Tania] Batzoglou

Art Education and the art of breaking the silence
Ismini Sakellariadi
Rethinking the Notion of Art Learning as a Social Activity

Abstract
This chapter examines the transition in contemporary art education that emerges when socially engaged art education (SEAE) tenets are considered. In particular, the notion of art learning as a social activity is revisited in order to define the role of traditional studio-oriented learning in SEAE in which the students’ collaboration and research on the community’s concerns and issues become the primary goal of art learning. I describe two teaching projects that I investigated: one with a regular K-12 art class and one with an after-school class. I delineate how studio-oriented learning is enriched by the collaborative learning experience and by students’ meaningful participation in the process and content of learning.

Keywords: socially engaged art, art learning, participation, object-making, social activity
Rethinking the Notion of Art Learning as a Social Activity

My introduction to teaching art began while I was an undergraduate student in the School of Fine Arts at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. I taught an after-school art class for a cultural organization in a small Greek city. These art classes were engaged with the community in several ways. Although the teaching paradigm was studio-oriented and that governed my teaching practices, I fostered the direct involvement of my students with the community’s life. Looking from the perspective of a visual artist and art educator whose practices mostly focus on studio practice, I acknowledge the challenge that emerges about the notions surrounding art objects and their creation in socially engaged art education (SEAE). The question naturally arises concerning the difference between the creation of art objects in the traditional sense and their creation as a social activity in this new learning context. O’Donoghue (2015) asserts that the attention of art education has shifted away from the exclusive production of objects to the vast possibilities that open up when making art is considered as a wider process of experiences and events.

In order to discuss this challenge, I examine two teaching projects that I conducted at different career stages: one at the beginning of my teaching journey and one recent project that conducted one year ago. In particular, I describe an art teaching project that I organized with a group of ten adolescent students in 1995. The students attended an after-school art class that was run by the cultural organization of the municipality of Veria, Greece. By taking the interpretive perspective of SEAE, I reflect on the events, process, and outcomes of the project. Later, I describe a more recent project that I organized with my art class in a public art high school. This example indicates the potential of learning when conventional art education stretches beyond studio production to include other activities that prompt dialogue and social action among the students. Later, I draw implications about skills that students develop and the role of art educators.

From Studio-Oriented Practice to Community Involvement

It is accepted that two separate realms have been developed in the contemporary art world. Tension has developed between the studio-oriented and the socially engaged approaches. However, the line between studio practice and socially engaged art is often blurred. Yet, there are specific attributes that are prerequisite for a socially engaged art project to be realized. In this new paradigm, art objects are used by the public in a particular social context when the relational nature of practice is considered. In contrast, studio-oriented art practices entail passive participation by limiting the public to viewing the art objects and speculating about their meaning. This particular ontological shift in the social
role of art implies a challenging new vision that artists have begun to adopt. As shown by recent socially engaged art projects, this social role of art becomes rather radical because it aims to directly affect people’s attitudes and behaviors (Frasz & Sidford, 2017). The tools that are used, such as dialogue and participation, prompt the public to become involved in important decisions regarding art events and practices. Thus, social problems and concerns of a particular community are then reexamined through an artist’s direct involvement with the community. As a consequence, the artist denies personal authorship and becomes a coordinator of the art action. These new conditions transform the public into an active body of members that determine the meaning of the art event. In other words, the artist attempts to effectively collaborate with the public. The tools and methods that are used include several modes of participation of the public, such as dialogue, public discussions, community organizing, and public awareness campaigns.

Obviously, this represents a significant shift of focus solely from the art objects themselves to human interactions. Bourriaud’s relational aesthetic theory, which is essential to the understanding of socially engaged art, states that “human interaction and its social context” replace the significance of art objects (Bourriaud, 1998, p. 14). The relational aesthetic is developed as the theoretical framework that aims to establish the perquisites of a new art genre and contemporary art world with a new realm of practices.

Some examples of socially engaged art practices incorporate art objects as a part of the event. For example, The Commons (2011), a work by Paul Ramirez Jonas, consists of a physical existence that has been located in the context of a museum. Yet, the art project is understood only when the instructions for the public’s participation are set and then allow people to affect and change the appearance of the art object. The Commons is a monument that represents a horse with no rider. It is made of cork material instead of bronze, and the public is allowed to attach messages onto the sculpture in order to transform it into a site of endless public voices (Pantuso, 2014). The public contributes to the physical appearance of the art and, as a consequence, to the intended meaning. Another example by the same artist, The Key to the City, is a symbolic action that is used in order for people to receive individual recognition. Citizens received a key and then were encouraged to investigate locations and places of the city than never before wonder about them. As an ordinary object the key is transformed due to the artistic purposes. Both of the examples ask participants to perform or re-perform an ordinary action by unraveling its symbolic meaning. The main purpose of this object-making, as shown by these examples of socially engaged art projects, is to affect social transformation through the direct and performative involvement of the community.

What contributes to the unique approach of art objects in socially engaged art is the performative activities of the public that become a significant ingredient of the art event. As a
consequence, the performance, as a genre, is reborn in the context of socially engaged art projects. Besides the different usage of objects, a bodily activity is involved that contributes to the meaning and the role of the art objects. Moreover, it opens possibilities for blurring the line between art and life, since ordinary activities are reexamined in a different context (e.g., using a sculpture as message posting board, as was done by Jonas). These conditions allow the participants to reflect on ordinary or mundane activities.

Art Learning as a Social Activity

Children, when they create and act in the studio environment, are usually faced with creative problems and the need to find their solutions. Although art learning aims to advance each student as an individual, there is a community to which all those individual students belong: the art room. As a consequence, studio learning is considered a social activity since students exist inside a community where they interact, discuss and communicate. For example, art learning as a social activity happens when the students collaborate to come up with creative ideas or a solution to the problems that are posed. In a traditional art classroom, these problems include concerns about the usage of art materials and processes, as well as meaning-making. The social interaction may include play, dialogue, etc.

Lowenfeld and Britain (1947) claimed each child’s individual art practice reflects both the mental capacities and several perspectives of growth, including social growth and social awareness. Of course, during the 1940s and later, studio activities in education were predominantly limited to basic painting, drawing, and so on. However, they recognized that studio activities can reflect the degree of personal growth. In terms of social growth, they claimed that art provides the tools for social growth to develop. For example, the reflection on a work of art by the child-creator and adults transforms the practice to social expression. Moreover, the drawing and painting activities, which depict several topics of the community, are acknowledged as having the art learning capacity to develop social awareness (Lowenfeld & Britain, 1947). Further, the collaboration and the communication exchange among peers offer additional opportunities for social awareness to develop in the art room.

Freedman (2010) discusses the relationship of creativity with social responsibility. Creativity as a social activity, according to Freedman, emerges in both the art room and the community of interest. Inside the art room, it consists of the conditions in which students are allowed to collaborate and learn from each other. In parallel, the informal learning that occurs in communities of interest, such as graffiti or the youth’s creative production on social media, is considered a social activity since it develops through collaboration. The group interaction, in this case, is crucial for members to come up with new ideas and tools with
which to create and communicate. A recent example of my high school art class is my students’ practice with digital collage, which is developed when screenshots are combined (Figures 1 and 2). This activity is related to how these students communicate with friends on Instagram. Consequently, these particular young people collectively develop a creative way to communicate by using a specific and original style of digital collage.

Social Activity in Socially Engaged Art Education (SEAE)

The notion of art practice as a social activity differentiates in the SEAE project. Similarly, though Lowenfeld and Britain’s concern about how art learning contributes to the children’s social growth and the development of the social awareness, SEAE aims to offer unique learning experiences that enable the young people to act and think critically about social concerns. In this learning context, studio learning is included, but it is not the crucial aspect of learning. Instead, other processes, such as collaboration or an engagement with the wider community’s concerns, become the primary purposes of the learning experience. The research that has been conducted in educational institution with socially engaged art projects indicates the potential of learning when students have the chance to develop critical stances and to collaborate during an art project (Schlemmer et al, 2017; Sanders-Bustle, 2018).

The purposes of a SEAE project are defined by considering different parameters than those that prompt teachers’ decisions in a traditional studio learning space. One of those parameters is the social context in which the project takes place. When these projects are implemented inside the school community, they often aim to extend the learning possibilities by allowing students to perform different modes of participation. In particular, some projects aim to transform mundane everyday school life by intervening in the ordinary conditions and structures. For example, the socially engaged art event that Sanders-Bustle (2018) organized in the learning context of a middle school aimed to enable students to realize the complicated relationship between art-making and schooling and allowed them visualize new educational roles. The project was part of an art education course, and students were asked to create a socially engaged art project for the school. Thus, such projects can and do challenge the conventional way of acting in schools.

The result of such educational events is sometimes a major disruption of the educational space. For example, the impulse to preserve and conserve past teaching methods, especially in the art room, causes tension when those methods are challenged by socially engaged art events. The motivation to initiate these projects is often affected negatively by the institutionalized nature and function of the school. The heavy institutional mandates often prove to be severe hindrances to creative learning. The school regulations,
which often are necessary, determine the preconceived ideas of what the role of the art subject is in the curriculum and, consequently, the forms of students’ participation. Despite this, the socially engaged art projects that are conducted at educational institutions, such as schools, aim to transform the way that the students participate in learning activities. For example, teaching tools, such as acting, role play, and symbolic use of images and objects, are inserted into the educational space in order to challenge the attitudes and behaviors of the students and teachers.

In addition, other art projects aim to create bonds between the school’s art learning and the concerns of the wider community. A significant emphasis is put on the learners’ contribution to the community in which they live, as well on the goals of learning. In SEAE, the roles of studio learning and object-making have been adapted in order to raise the critical social consciousness of the learners. For instance, Schlemmer et al.’s (2017) project used studio learning on ceramics to raise students’ consciousness concerning the global water crisis. Moreover, The Food Landscapes project of Buffington et al. (2015) indicates the potential of socially engaged art to connect participants with the community through the use of art-making, creative problem-solving, and cooking. Both examples imply that ordinary art activities do not aim only to create aesthetically pleasing art objects. On the contrary, art-making and its objects aim to foster dialogue and simultaneously challenge the ways that people interrelate in the community.

In order to discuss the transition to the concept of studio learning as a social activity in the context of SEAE, I offer two examples from my own art teaching experience that I argue extend beyond the studio-oriented practice. The first took place twenty-three years ago, in which ordinary studio learning was performed in a public space. The other example occurred in a public K-12 school one year ago. My purpose is to discuss their potential as projects. My perspective incorporates the position, which has been previously described by Washington (2011), that art learning should emphasize the advancement of relationships and social structuring of the participants rather than object-making and aesthetic appreciation.

“A Movable Art Room”

In Greece there are many opportunities for children, youth, and adolescents to learn art outside of K-12 schools. There are art classes offered by cultural centers in the municipalities. These classes and art programs emphasize traditional artistic skills and art processes. However, though the learning involved in the life of the community, it rarely addresses the issues and concerns of particular communities.

In 1995, I organized a teaching event with my after-school adolescent studio class. I
was teaching in an art program that was run by a cultural center of the municipality in the Greek town of Veria. The teaching event took place in a public space in the town. The setting of art learning, which is normally the traditional art room, dramatically changed and became visible to anyone who wanted to be involved when the art room moved to the public space. The *movable art room* was born. It was an experiment that challenged and dramatically altered the ordinary art classroom conditions that the students were used to experiencing.

The goal of our art project was the creation of an easily built construction that we named “A Home for Art.” Large-scale canvas paintings with acrylic materials constituted the walls of this small one-room building. Students would ordinarily meet before and during the construction to discuss their project as well as their interrelationship with the people who passed by the public space. After completing the construction, students used it as a mobile and portable studio class for approximately ten days. The inner space of this portable studio class offered an art classroom privacy for students and the art teacher. Simultaneously, art class life was intervened and affected by urban sounds such as the sounds and speech of passers-by. Previously unknown people asked the students questions, such as what was the purpose of our activity. At the same time, the group of students and I were involved in an ongoing discussion about what the role of art is in a local community.

In terms of the public space which was developed and the interrelationship of the students and with the members of the wider community, I maintain that this project was a successful example of SEAE. During the teaching event, I was completely convinced that its significance was not primarily the creation of art objects, the development of artistic technical abilities, or the offering of an art experience with materials for large painting surfaces. It was more than that. The movable art class prompted a critical reflection on the concept of the social role of art and art learning. Simultaneously, the interrelationship of the students themselves and their communication skills were positioned at the core of the event. Literally, the teacher and students, as equal participants of the art event, were transformed into exhibited items while they re-performed learning and teaching within a different surrounding and context.

“Me and My Teddy Bear”

The second art event happened inside a K-12 school educational settings, taking place at the Art High School of Thessaloniki during the fall of 2017. Seventeen eighth grade students participated. The purpose of the project was to organize an event for the Human Rights Day (Letsiou, 2019a, 2019b). The students were to participate in a series of in-class art productions, including video production, and in a school art event. The project took place
in the practice-based learning environment where students learn how to manipulate art materials and create meaning through their artworks. As a consequence, one challenge of the project was to involve the students in activities that were not considered as traditional studio learning. Besides the studio production, the learning included a section which was developed with one of my student’s unsolicited video productions on social media.

The student’s unsolicited video production was incorporated into the art classroom. Previous research has been done on using youth’s creative practices on social media in the art learning context. In particular, Duncum (2014) explored the use of a video genre that was developed on social media in order to teach the characteristics of the spectators’ gaze. In this particular research project, I decided to use a video mode that was developed by my students because I considered it to be an effective way of fully engaging the participants in the learning process. This particular video production was uploaded in one of my grade 8 student’s Instagram account, which was named @asproulis14_offical. The videos presented stories with an imaginary virtual character depicted using a stuffed bear. The cast of characters consisted of stuffed toys from the boy’s huge collection (Figure 3). The stories were typical TV broadcasts of soccer games with advertisements and players’ interviews.

The same video mode was used to create a video for the monument that was dedicated to Human Rights Day. The student, the owner of the Instagram account, had the opportunity to display the process of creating the video to his peers. A tiny photographic studio was then installed in the art classroom (Figure 4). Each student brought his or her own teddy bear or another stuffed animal to the classroom so that the object could be captured on the camera of the student who had filmed Asproulis (Figure 5). Other parts of the preparation included editing the video made up of the photographs of the stuffed animals and then adding the voices of students speaking out the articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). We simplified the editing process because I wanted all the students to be introduced to the new tool of video editing, even if some had learned more sophisticated techniques in their out-of-school activities.

The students were introduced to the ideas and concepts of monuments while considering what a monument dedicated to the UDHR might look like. Students learned and investigated the different kinds of monuments we interact with every day in society, such as buildings, statues, and archeological sites. Moreover, they realized that each monument serves several purposes. In this situation, the students needed to decide what kind of monument would be suitable for informing the school community about the Human Rights Day. As part of the practice-based learning process, I had introduced my students to the techniques used for creating a relief. The students were inspired by the ancient Greek reliefs and thought that painted depictions of the ancient reliefs might be included in a monument for later installation at the school (Figure 6).
We designed an art intervention that included a screening of the video and the construction of a temporary monument. In addition, a corkboard was placed on an adjacent wall, and students were encouraged to attach their own messages in response to Human Rights Day on this board. The exhibition also included a photograph taken by a child who used to live in a refugee camp in Thessaloniki. This photograph was taken after a big fire took place in the refugee camp in the summer of 2017, and it shows the child’s teddy bear inside the destroyed building (Figure 7). I decided to place this photograph in the exhibition venue so that students, or other participants, could extract their own connotations from it. In these ways, the students were engaged in a multimedia installation that included new media work, objects, a photograph, and an interactive site for individual participation.

The teaching process and the school event offered opportunities for the students to collaborate and to gain experience in creating a collective artwork. Furthermore, the interactive stages of the project involved several levels of participation by the school community. For example, the installation of the tiny photographic studio inside the art classroom altered the daily classroom routine and operated as a collaborative teaching experience where students carried significant responsibilities. Further, the post-it messages on the corkboard allowed the students to acknowledge the concerns of their peers. When the art event was staged, the students and other members of the school community could participate in a dialogue about Human Rights Day and about the many misunderstandings that arise but are normally hidden. For example, during the exhibition, students disputed whether the rights of the queer members of the community qualified as legitimate human rights. Even though my purpose had been to involve the students in a dialogue about the refugee crisis in order to uncover problematic considerations, other social issues emerged. The socially engaged character of the art event was shown to have the potential to extend and to develop according to the interests and responses of the students.

Implications for Teaching Practice

The two projects I have described raise questions about how art teaching may be practiced when a new understanding of the art object and its creation as a social activity is established and when the emphasis of learning is shared between studio learning and the collaborative activities and social context. The traditional artistic skills are stretched beyond their normal boundaries, and other processes and skills are addressed. In addition to the pure joy and satisfaction of artistic creation, decision-making, problem-solving, cultural competency (understanding different cultural perspectives), listening with respect, and empathy are some of the additional skills that students develop.
Further, the art teachers perform new roles. I list below some of the characteristics of the art teacher that are derived from a rendering of the characteristics of a socially engaged artist that was developed by Frasz and Sidford (2017).

1. “The primary purpose of art and artists is to be a catalyst for positive change in the world.”

When artists enter the educational setting, they actualize this role by creating a learning environment that fosters creativity, collaboration, and empathy; those abilities are important for a healthy society.

. Art integrates creativity and activism.

When artists enter the educational setting, they encourage students’ activist actions that engage the wider community.

. It is not aimed at an art world audience.

When artists enter the educational setting, they praise students’ aesthetic preferences and legitimize the diverse forms of expression that are derived from the students’ own world to enrich the meaning of their own art practices.

. Tools that are used include dialogue, community organizing, public awareness campaigns, etc.

When artists enter the educational setting, they establish the importance of studio production by creating the proper conditions for the students to collaborate and participate in a fruitful dialogue and exchange.

. Artists work in collaboration with other community members or other artists.

They value the process of creation.

When artists enter the educational setting, they foster collaboration among students, teachers, and other practitioners. The roles of the student as a teacher and the teacher as a student are reversed (Frie, 1972).

. The artwork may include social, political, or economic issues.

When artists enter the educational setting, they make visible the social, political, and cultural contexts of the art practices. They engage several marginalized communities in art learning settings. This perspective aligns with Freire’s assertion that the curriculum should consider both the objects of learning as well as the people and the social, political, and cultural conditions wherein they live and act (1972).

Conclusions

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that art learning should emphasize the advancement of the relationships of the participants and social structuring rather than only object-making and its aesthetic appreciation. The Portable Art Room and Me and My Teddy Bear projects have been provided as examples of teaching practices can successfully extend beyond structured instruction. The collaboration between the teacher
and the students, as well as among students themselves, and the initiative that the students took during the learning experience allowed them to control and direct the learning process. Subsequently, the role of educator merged with that of a socially engaged artist because the process assumed a prominent significance over the art product itself. As Schlemmer (2016) argues, there is an education perspective in socially engaging art that aligns with the willingness to question the normative teaching practices.

In contemporary society, which is governed by tensions and contradictions, an unquestionable reconsideration of the role of the art subject in education is needed. In this learning context, the cultural and social competencies have emerged as a significant part of the learning objectives of present and future art rooms. I urge art educators to rethink the possibilities that socially engaged art offers to contextualize the meaning of art learning as a social activity. When the sole art creation is transformed into collective and collaborative action, a new understanding of the identity of the artist and the social role of art is revealed. Thereafter, the social role of art is implied in a contemporary art learning context. The art object becomes a motivation that prompts other events to happen. As a consequence, the taken-for-granted values of art learning as a mere studio-oriented experience, values which still govern the majority of art instruction, are challenged.
References


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Figure 1. Instagram digital collage as playful communicative tool of youth

Figure 2. Instagram digital collage as playful communicative tool of youth
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Figure 3. Video shot of the high school student’s video production on Instagram

Figure 4. The tiny photographic studio installed in the art room
Figure 5. Shots of the video
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Figure 6. The monument inside the school space
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Figure 7. A corkboard with post-it note sticks and the child’s photograph inside the refugees’ camp