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SECTION

Arctic Cool: Applied Visual Arts

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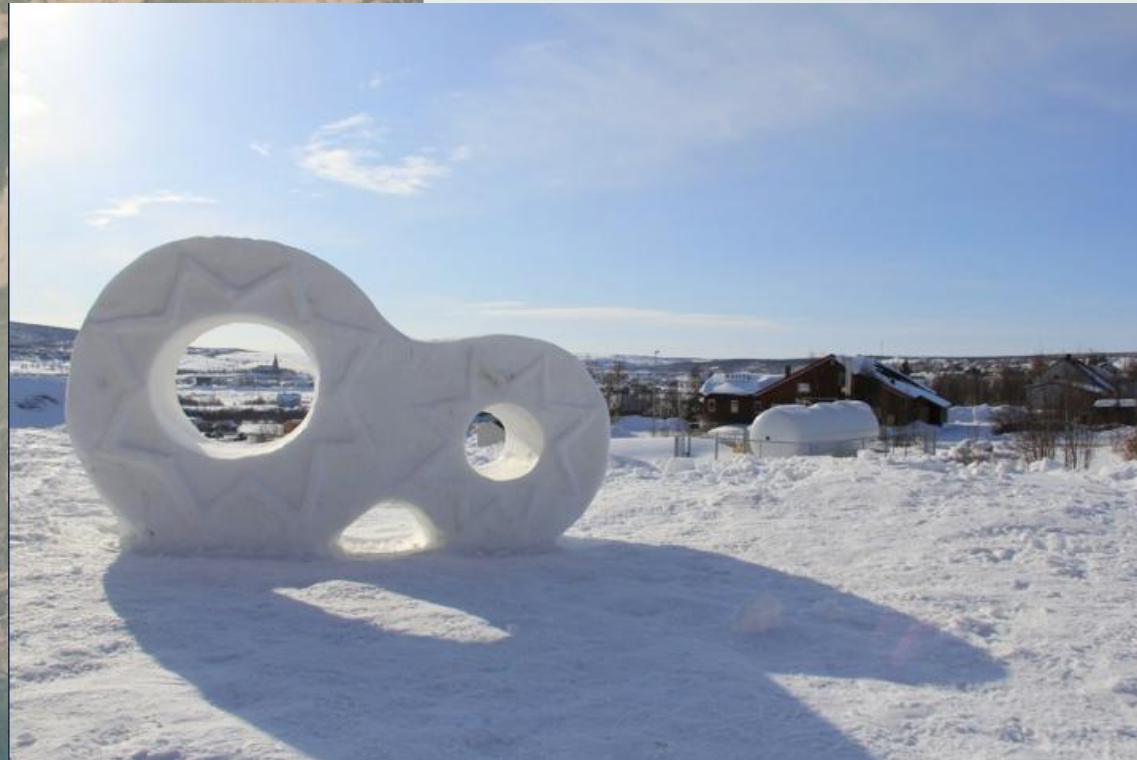


Figure 1 – Ice Carving on a grand scale. Photo: Glen Coutts

Figure 1a – Applied Visual Arts student led workshop, snow and ice carving. Photo Elina Harkonen

Something interesting is happening the far North of Finland; a unique masters level arts programme is being developed at the University of Lapland. It combines practical experience of working in groups and communities with theoretical and practical experience, it is called Applied Visual Arts (AVA). This short essay and collection of images tells part of the story of AVA, depicting the results of projects and some of the processes involved in producing the artwork.

Many people will understand the term 'applied arts' to mean glass, ceramics, furniture, graphic design, architecture and so on and in a lot of contexts that is accurate, but that is not what is meant by applied visual arts as it is taught and practiced in the North of Finland. The key word is 'applied', it implies something useful, relevant and suitable to a particular context, visual art that is produced following a careful contextual investigation and interpretation, almost always in collaboration with others; community groups, business partners or both.



Figure 2 Applied Visual Arts means close collaboration.
Photo: Glen Coutts

The AVA programme is not about training teachers of art, although there is always a pedagogical dimension to the projects that students design and carry out. In many ways, the training is about the processes of art as social engagement in its many forms. As an integral part of the programme, students are required to design and deliver innovative



productions on location and with community groups – see Figures 3-5.

Figure 3 Meeting community group. Photo: Glen Coutts; Figure 4 Age does not matter. Photo: Mirja Hiltunen



Figure 5 Community project procession. Photo: Glen Coutts

At the core of AVA practice lie the notions of participation, engagement, collaboration and innovation. To design and deliver projects such as those depicted here requires not only the ability to innovate, but also the capacity to motivate. We are training artists who will act as facilitators for a community groups or companies, bringing skills and experience to enable partners to arrive at solutions to problems or issues they have identified. The artists must constantly refine and develop their own skills, not just those required to create artwork, but also those necessary for understanding partners' concerns. Excellent communication, interper-



sonal, motivational and organisational skills are prerequisites. The emphasis is on the role of the artist as facilitator or animateur and it is the job of the artist to



make the artwork in collaboration with community groups, local companies or service providers, for example tourist organisations.

Figure 6 Artists working with companies. Photo: Glen Coutts

Figure 7 The River Lights Fire Sculpture Festival. Photo: Glen Coutts

Figure 8 Fire Sculpture Event (Reykjavik). Photo: Elina Harkonen



The key characteristics of Applied Visual Art include an emphasis on process rather than product; active rather than passive engagement with issues and problems; the artist as facilitator - emphasis on developing the skills of others within the context of a community setting. As a result, AVA might be seen not only as a particular form of arts practice, but also as an inclusive and powerful model of learning. AVA also has much in common with design disciplines for example service design, participatory design, co-creation and user generated design.



Figure 9 Working in Groups (Syktyvkar, Rovaniemi, Lahti and Helsinki). Photo: Mirja Hiltunen

Applied Visual Art as presented here refers to projects that involve artists working with, or for, people in a public context. The art form is a context-driven model of art practice characterised by notions of participation, collaboration and inclusion. AVA projects frequently embrace work across the arts disciplines. Projects might include, for example performance, sound and movement. Working in this field, artists need to draw on different disciplines, for example anthropology, cultural geography and placemaking, sociology, history or town and country planning. So, inevitably, there are many points of overlap and interaction between different disciplines and it is impossible for the artist to be an expert in all of them.

It could be argued that AVA events and artworks offer examples of sound art practices on the one hand and powerful learning situations on the other. Furthermore, the notions of participation and co-creation are increasingly to the fore in current educational thinking. The balance between theory and practice and 'hands on' thinking through making permeates good practice in AVA, similarly it may offer something to formal education.

A new masters degree is launched by the University of Lapland for 2015, the Master's Degree Programme in Arctic Art and Design with specialization in Applied Visual Arts or Service Design.

There is also a vibrant international dimension to the work going on in applied visual arts, for example the Arctic Sustainable Arts and Design (ASAD) network (a thematic network of the University of the Arctic) has over 20 member institutions from across the Arctic and Circumpolar North.



Video 'day 4': 'Summer school in the Arctic'
Credits: Anna-Mari Nukarinen & Nuno Escudeiro
Music: Antti Lindholm
<https://youtu.be/OL8fVWc0hhQ>

Artic Circles

