From Imitation to Open-ended Process - Using Contemporary Artwork Examples in the Creative Connections Project

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Abstract

In this vissual essay I will present the experiences and different pedagogical uses of contemporary art in the Creative Connections project (2012-2014), which aimed to explore and develop ways of increasing understanding of European identity and citizenship among children and young people by connecting art and citizenship education. The essay describes the use of the contemporary artwork database that was made in the project. The research concentrates on how the given examples of artwork were received and used by teachers and pupils. The findings present the different approaches used in the project to involve contemporary artworks in the context of European citizenship and identity in education.

Keywords

contemporary art, identity, art education, international project, blogging

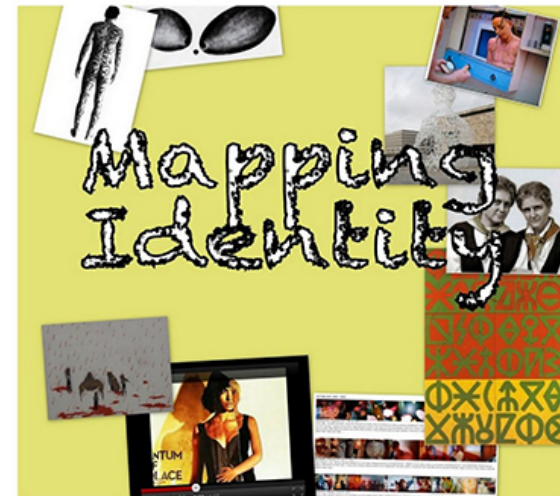## Creative Connections project

The research project included researchers and visual art educators from partner universities in the UK, Ireland, the Czech Republic, Spain, Portugal and Finland who collaborated with elementary teachers, art teachers and civil education teachers. The action research involved 27 researchers, 25 schools, 45 teachers and 1,080 pupils. The partner countries worked together through digital media by sharing blogs between classes in different countries. Part of the project involved experimenting with the use of online translation software to help pupils to communicate in their own languages.

In the Creative Connection project, the artwork examples and art-making process were seen as ways to approach the abstract concepts of citizenship and identity. The main discussion was on how children and young people understand and feel about themselves in the context of Europe and how they see their own personal, local and national identities. The aim was to create space for discussing identities in social interaction, to explore the representations of identities and to create own representations.

The Artwork database

The database was started by forming five categories based on what Lacy (1995) described as the different roles of art, developed by Hiltunen (2009): Art as A. cultural self-expression, B. cultural interpretation, C. cultural reporter, D. cultural guide and E. activism. The aim was to cover the whole range of contemporary art from different materials and techniques to different approaches and ways of working used by artists today. The categories were intended to be used for exploring different approaches to making art and learning in the classroom. The final version of the gallery has 64 artworks in the following categories:

- A: **Mapping Identity** - presenting different aspects of personal identity

- B: **Mapping Nation** - presenting different aspects of national identity

- C: **Visual Reports** - art as reporter of the cultural environment and phenomena

- D: **Cultural Guides** - art as a guide for seeing and presenting things in different ways

- E: **Action!** - Art as making a statement, expressing opinions, activism
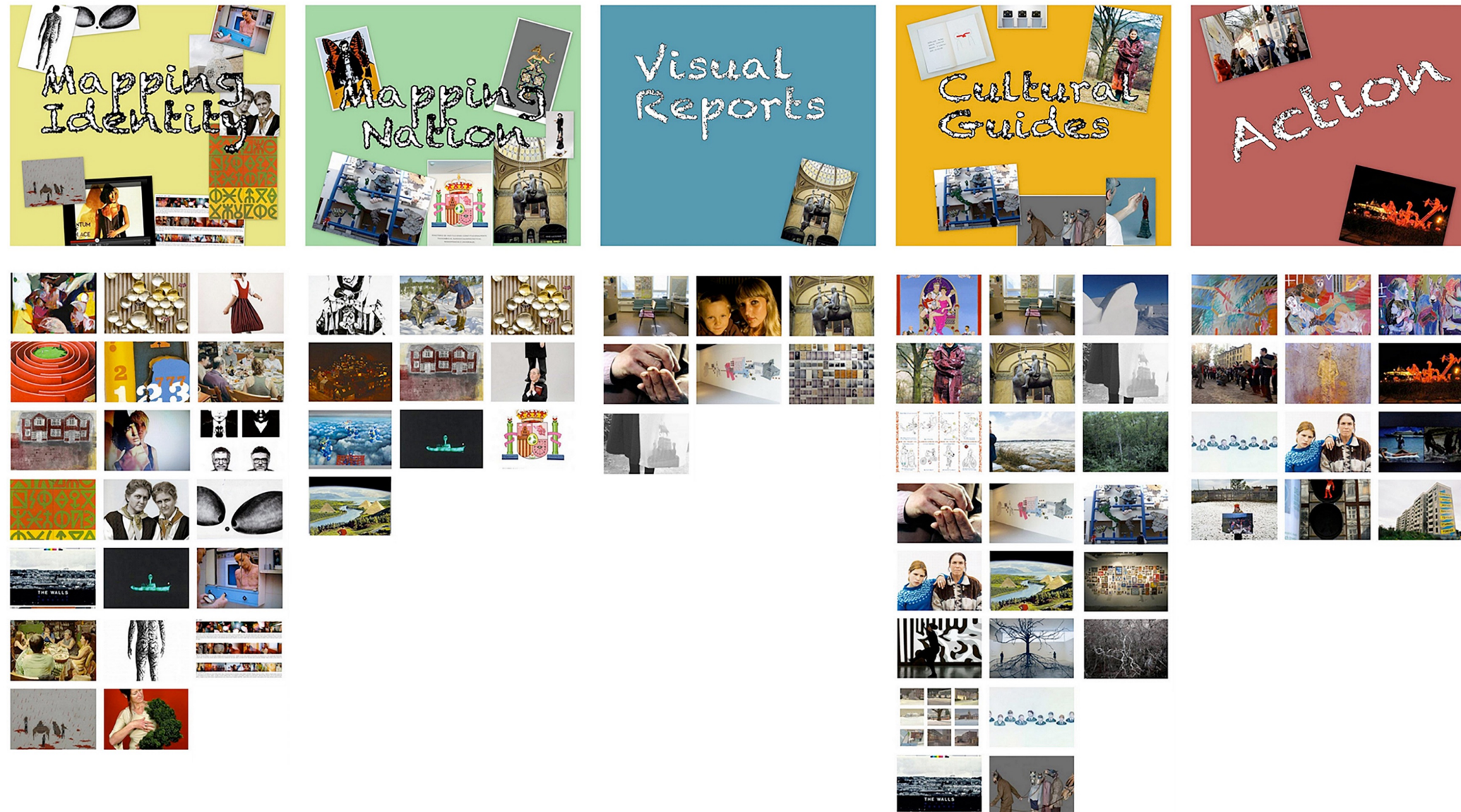
Figure 1: the Creative Connections' Artwork database

Data and methods

In this essay I will focus on the data from the case studies, reports from each participating school written by the country's researchers based on observations on school visits and interviews with teachers and pupils. I analyzed the case studies using a data-based analysis method. What started to emerge from the texts created the categories: mentions of individual artworks used, mentions of who selected the artworks, approaches, uses, outcomes. Coding mentions made it possible to group the information by country, school level and category in order to draw conclusions.

The use of the artwork database in the school projects

The most commonly reported use of the artwork database in the case studies was to 'generate discussion' or 'promote conversation.' Other popular ways to approach the artworks were making re-interpretations or responses, which in some cases were called "analyzing and exploring the artworks visually". This is also visible in the pupils' works (Figure 2). In a few cases, the pupils also made written analyses. The artworks were noted in many cases to serve as examples and inspiration. They were also used to demonstrate roles of art, notions of stereotypes or concepts of how to present something. In some cases the teachers used the examples to create dialog with other images and pupils' own art making, and to increase awareness of art and social issues.

In roughly half of the cases, the teachers selected the examples and in the other half the pupils glanced through the database and selected artworks for analysis. Teachers with younger pupils more often selected the images to be explored.

In each country half of the used artworks were from their own artists and half from the other five countries. The most popular artworks were two-dimensional, realistic and easy to imitate and understand. They presented views on personal and national identities (categories A and B). Clear visual references to some of the mentioned artworks were found in pupils' work (Figure 2), but not for all. This indicates that some artworks were especially useful in evoking conversation and others inspired visual representations.

Figure 2 (next page): Examples of the various uses of Eduard Ovcacék's painting:

a   The original work "Signs"

b   A Finnish pupil's version of the painting in drawn form

c   A visual inspiration for exploring the signs in Spanish pupils' group work

d   An inspiration through language and writing for the theme "Book as me" in a Czech school project

e   An interpretation in the form of a sound work – a Finnish class created a soundscape for the painting

Different approaches to using the artwork examples

The different approaches in using the artwork examples could be categorized into four groups. The emphasis on pupils' voices was one of the project's aims and this also began to be important in the search for pedagogical approaches. The pupils' works show the variety of the amount of control the children had over the process and how much of their own voice they were able to bring out; in other words, how strictly the teachers framed the assignment in order to control the process and predict the outcomes. The categories start from assignments where the artwork example guided the outcome more strictly, moving to the more open-ended art projects.

1   **Making your own version.** The artworks were visually analyzed by making a new version, a response, a pastiche, by drawing, painting and staging photographs. These pupils' works have a clear visual resemblance to the original artwork and often imitate its composition and technique (Figure 3). This was a popular assignment and used in many schools and countries, often as individual work related to expressing aspects of personal or national identity.

2   **Inspiration for a technique, form or subject.** The topics, techniques or visual structure of an artwork served as an inspiration for the pupil's work. These pupils' works still make visual references to the artwork. One Portuguese class analyzed the work of Sean Hillen and made their own vision of a cityscape with layers of the past, present and future, by imitating the composition of the work and using the same collage technique (Figure 4). The difference to the first category is the thought and process regarding the content and the way of working in a group. The artwork form is utilized further to express the pupils' views and thoughts.

3   **Example of a concept.** The artworks and categories showed issues that art can address and how those issues can be visually approached. The artwork database was used in dialog with their own work process and several artworks were used during the process. One of the Spanish classes made art projects in small groups with topics chosen by the pupils themselves and used different artworks from the database to reflect their topic, aesthetic style, format and technique (Figure 5).

4   **Art as a political tool.** The artworks and the categories also served as an example of the different forms and roles of contemporary art. In particular, the political side of art opened new perspectives and community and environmental art techniques took the pupils out of the classrooms. These pupils' works no longer resemble the artwork examples but present more unique processes around actual topics in their community, society and surroundings (Figure 6). The school projects in this category achieved what Varto (2012) saw as the contribution of contemporary art to art education: making art starting from its political function and ability to create a place for meeting and discussion.

Figure 3: Alena Kotzmannová's work: "Shopping is my Hobby" and reinterpretation by Czech pupils.

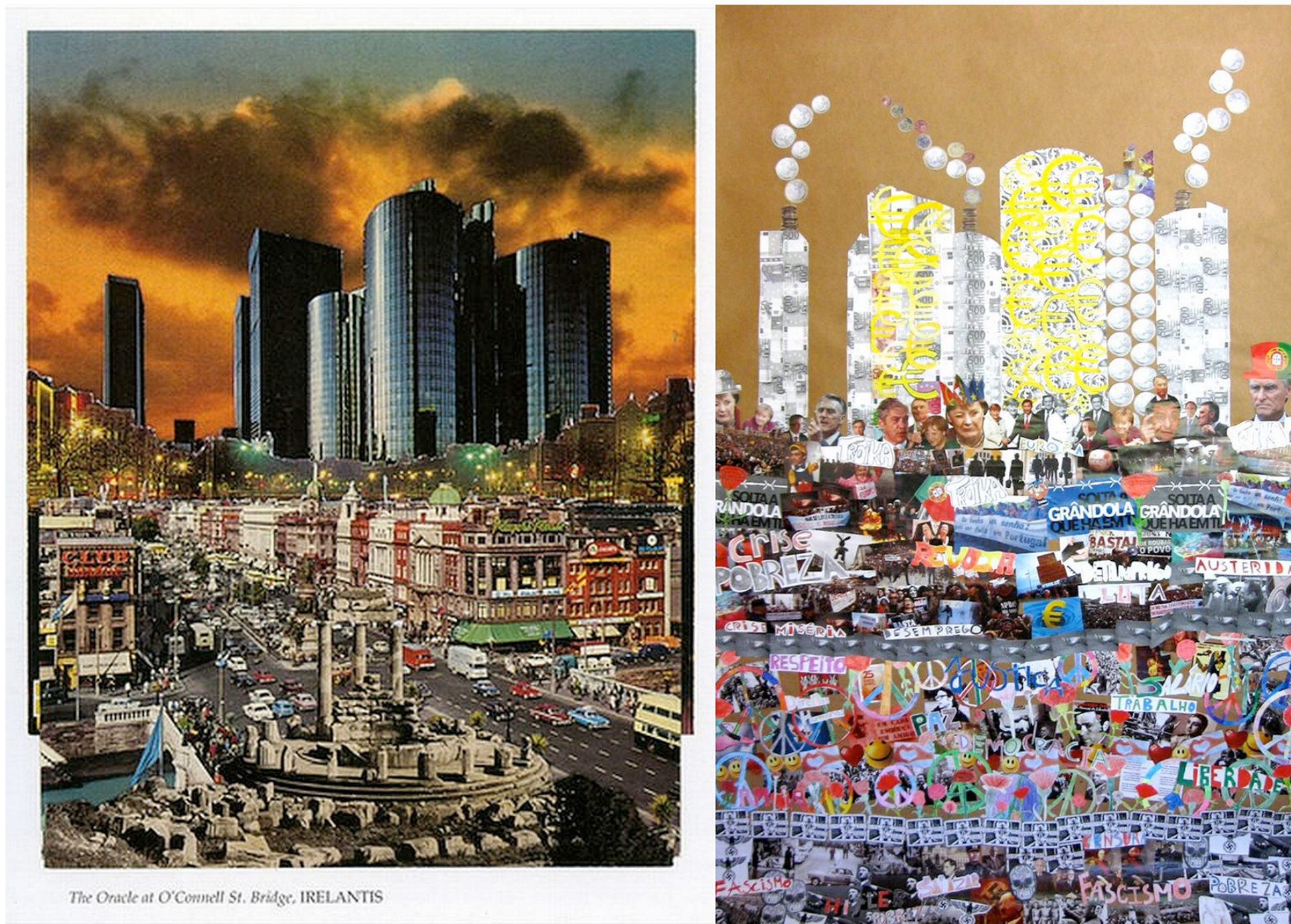The Oracle at O'Connell St. Bridge, IRELANTIS

Figure 4: Sean Hillen: "The Oracle in the O'Connell Street Bridge, Irelantis" and children's work: "Money Rules in Europe."

Figure 5: Murals by the group with the theme "Art of Sport" and one reference artwork, Petri Hytönen's painting "Finland – Sweden."

Figure 6: "Money in the sewer" comments on the economic crisis and politicians misusing money; Pedestrian crossing with the consequences of cutbacks in education, health, work, school, justice, etc. "We want the new School!" work includes pupils' names glued to a fence that bars access to the construction site of a new school building that has been left unfinished.

Conclusions

As a hypothesis, I was expecting to draw out the art education profiles of each partner country as the results of the study. Similar approaches were found, despite the differences in curricula, teaching arrangements, teacher education and facilities. The uses selected were more directed by the age of the pupils than the country, as the controlled assignments were mostly given to the youngest pupils and the most popular forms of assignments were used in all countries.

What difference did contemporary art make? The case studies report that the teachers and researchers found that it changed the pupils' understanding of art, and developed their visual literacy and awareness of art as a political tool. The experience encouraged teachers to show and discuss images and artworks more with the class, since image analysis was found to be an educational tool. This was new, especially for those teachers who did not specialize in the arts, but in general the pupils' open and enthusiastic response to the contemporary art surprised the teachers, who had had their doubts. Teachers had different starting points in using the artwork examples and various amounts of support during the process. Meaningful use of the artwork database was achieved either because of the teacher's expertise in art education or with the cooperation and support of the researcher as an art educator.

As intended, the artwork database worked as a space for dialog and expression, for talking about emotions and opinions. The categories of the artwork database worked in encouraging participants to explore artworks from different countries and as guidelines for art education in the schools, since connections were found between the database categories and use of artworks. The artworks made pupils think, understand concepts and reflect their identity and social issues. Using the same artworks in different countries and schools raised the question of how the same image can be seen and understood from different perspectives and cultural backgrounds. The contemporary art methods gave freedom to an open-ended process.

Notes

This visual essay is based on the article:

Manninen, A. (2015). *European Identity Through Art: Using the Creative Connections Artwork Database to Develop the Use of Contemporary Art in Education.* In M. Kallio-Tavin & J. Pullinen (Eds.), Conversations on Finnish Art Education (pp. 140-154). Aalto University publication series Art+Design+Architecture 5/ 2015. Helsinki: Aalto ARTS Books.

For more information on the Creative Connections-project visit http://creativeconnexions.eu.eu

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