



# Interdisciplinary Intentions – Reflecting on my Teaching Practice

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## Abstract

This article is my reflection on various visual art courses that I have taught to primary school generalist teacher-trainees. The students I taught were studying to become teachers for grades one to six. Surprisingly, the interart teaching method, e.g. integrating the arts, was new to most of the students. I introduced tasks that were designed to get the students involved in expressing themselves visually and verbally, with sound, music and movement. Examples of student work from the basic 5 ETCS course (visual art education), and from the optional 25 ETCS course (art education as a minor subject) are presented.

**Keywords:** art education, interdisciplinary, interarts, performance, generalist teacher training

## An interdisciplinary approach to enhancing body-mind wellbeing

The visual arts include aspects of music, drama and dance. All of these involve 'reception, emotion, and the creative processes: a love of manipulation (of both forms and materials), a delight of sensations, and considerable pleasure in the contemplation as well as creation of structured experiences' (Gaitskell, Hurwitz & Day, 1982, p. 403).

The qualities of these arts correspond to the learning outcomes listed by Hoffman Davis (2012, 13):

- 1 Tangible product – imagination and agency
- 2 Focus on emotion – expression and empathy
- 3 Ambiguity – interpretation and respect
- 4 Process orientation – inquiry skills and reflection
- 5 Humanity connection – engagement and responsibility.

My main pedagogical aim is to organize classes that use these outcomes to enhance the wellbeing of students. To heighten the connectivity between body and mind, I often start the class with some kind of relaxation exercise. My classes also contain many other exercises that use all the senses and encourage bodily movement.

I enjoy taking students outside of the classroom; for example, in an environmental camp, I led a project in which Niina built



a totem with red strings and asked other students to search for energy by walking in and out the marked 'rays' (Figures 1–3. Niina Larikka: *Totem*, 2012).



## Say it with words: ways to verbalize

Verbal expression is often used to reflect upon works of art, to evaluate them or to explain their meaning. I prefer tasks that ask students to ponder their personal values, an exercise which, according to Fleming (2012, 117) is one of the foundations of art. For example, in 3D design class, I asked students to choose their idol, then plan and create a chair for this person and explain the design. Student Sanna Koivisto wrote:

The chair suits my big brother's style.

Here he can sit when watching TV or playing games. Also, his mates can sit down on this chair when visiting him.

My big brother likes modern furniture with some elements differing from tradition. For this reason, the materials are chosen to be black cloth and metal net.

(Images 4-5 (next page). Sanna Koivisto: *Chair for My Big Brother*, 2012).

## TUOLI ISOVELJELLE

Tuoli on isoveljen tyylinen. Tässä hän voi istua katsoessaan elokuvia tai pelatessaan pelejä. Myös veljen kaverit voivat istahtaa tälle tuolille tullessaan kylään.

Isoveli pitää moderneista huonekaluista joissa on vähän jotain perinteisestä poikkeavaa. Siksi tuoliin on valittu materiaaliksi musta kangas ja metalliverkko.

Sanna Korvisto R2



Sometimes a poetical approach helps to deepen the message of the work. In the environmental camp, the students created 'kingdoms of senses', and wrote related poems that offered something to all the senses (Figures 6-9. Pirjo Tolonen: *A Kingdom of the Senses*, 2005).

Water itself is my kingdom.  
I leaned on the pine at the tip  
of the point,  
looked at the glimmering of  
the water.



I knelt on a hummock  
by the pond.  
'What fragrances!'  
I offered the visitors some  
pungent cranberries,  
my favourite berries.



Breaking into song, I asked  
the visitor  
to grasp the oar.



'Row, row to the island...!'



A personal *punctum* (piercing) photo is another starting point for integrating poetry with other art forms (Image 10. *Anu's punctum photo*, 2001). Anu accompanied her ensuing photo triptych with a long and touching poem that dealt with her connection with her mother, first as a caressed child, then as an independent young woman not needing anyone to comb her hair, though still longing to be touched, and finally, portrayed Anu's mother as caretaker to Anu's grandmother, with thoughts about Anu's possible future as a mother (Images 11–13. *Anu's Triptych*, 2001).



Figure 10. *Anu's punctum photo*,



Figures 11–13. *Anu's Triptych*, 2001

Sometimes, poetry can be based on the work of a fellow student. Irene Heikkilä responded to Hanna's painting (Image 14. Hanna Sipilä: *Silence*, watercolour painted in silence, 2012) with a poem:

Glow of morning,  
hue of light.  
Its gaze is flooding  
softness embracing the heart,  
that leaves behind,  
in the depth,  
pulsing warmth.  
Beauty touches,  
and from far away  
I hear  
the unique song of my life.

Gradually, I realize:  
for me, I have  
only this moment.

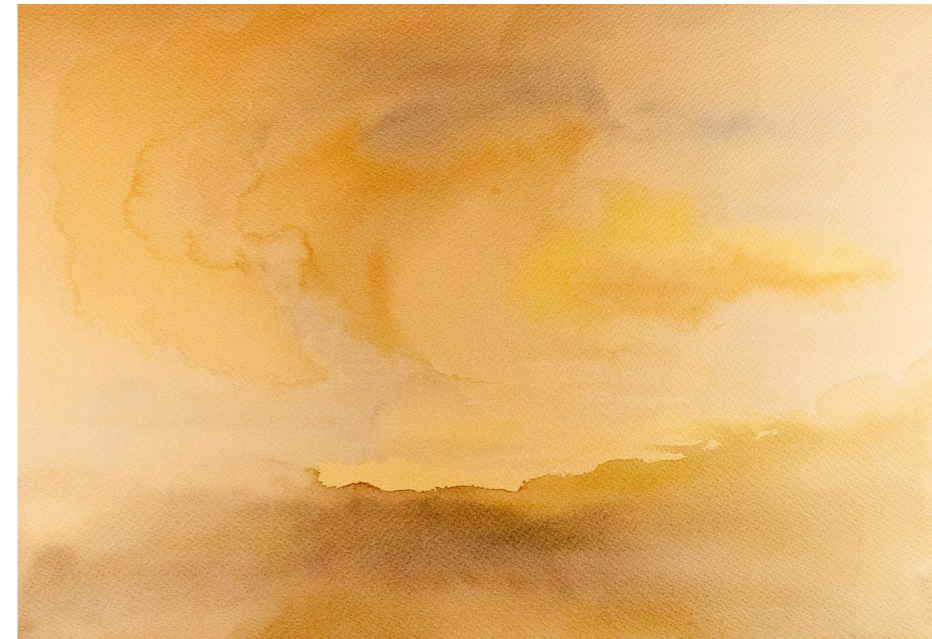


Figure 14. Hanna Sipilä: *Silence*, watercolour painted in silence, 2012

Words or stories may also serve as a good starting point for a visual work. I introduced a method of making a visual poem based on a peer student's story (Ulkuniemi, 2010). I combined student Inga Annala's *kurotus* (reaching out) idea with memory work and private photographs. First, a student told a story based on another student's chosen photograph (Image 15. 'Valma's photo', 2007). The pair of students wrote the story down, and then created an interpretative visual poem based on the story (Image 16. *Darja's visual poem based on Valma's story*, 2007). Darja's work included the words 'one day...more skilled', because she found a theme of envy in Valma's story.



Figure 15. 'Valma's photo', 2007



Figure 16. *Darja's visual poem based on Valma's story*, 2007



An international interdisciplinary experiment took place when Finnish art education students worked in pairs with Slovakian English literature students. They interacted via the internet to design visual poems, starting from the question 'where do I come from' (Ulkuniemi & Husárová, 2015).

Graphic design often offers a natural impetus to combine words and images. In our three-year international project, Spanish and Finnish students designed posters that included at least one word about their urban heritage, such as public sculptures. The results were shown on the internet, and verbal comments were provided by the pairs of students, then the work was explained by the makers (People and Heritage, 2016).

### **Music as a starting point for individual responses**

One way to encourage students to make music based on art is to ask them to choose an element in an abstract picture and assign a sound to it. The teacher can then lead an orchestra playing the painting as a partita, showing the duration of each element by pointing it out.

More often, I use music to evoke feelings, associations or memories. This easily leads to unique results because all the students have a personal way of interpreting music. If the task is very open, the student may also draw from the rhythm instead of revealing their inner self. Here are some drawings that students made in 2012 after listening to Ulla Pirttijärvi's Sami music.



Figure 17. Anne Niskala

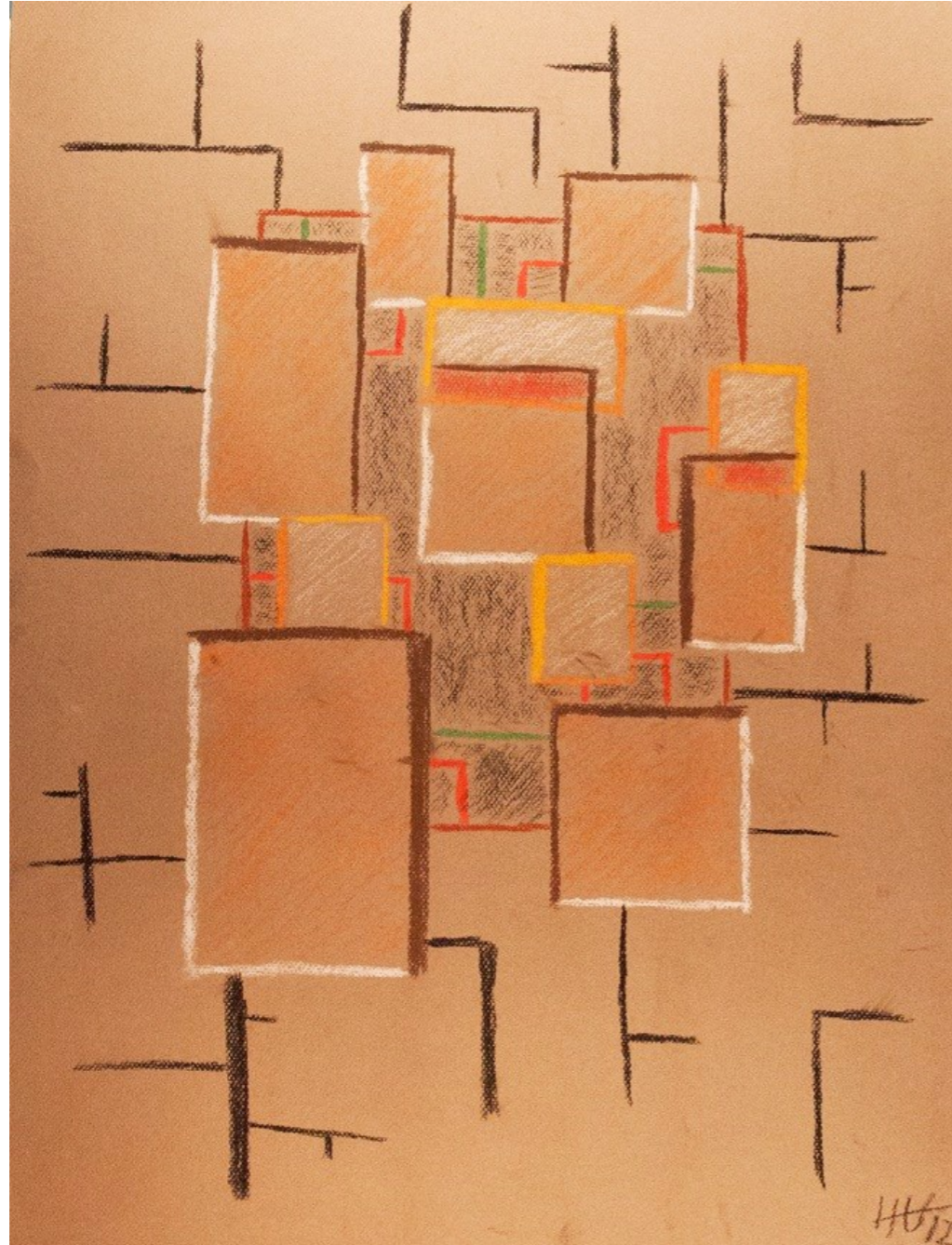


Figure 18. Hannu Ulvinen

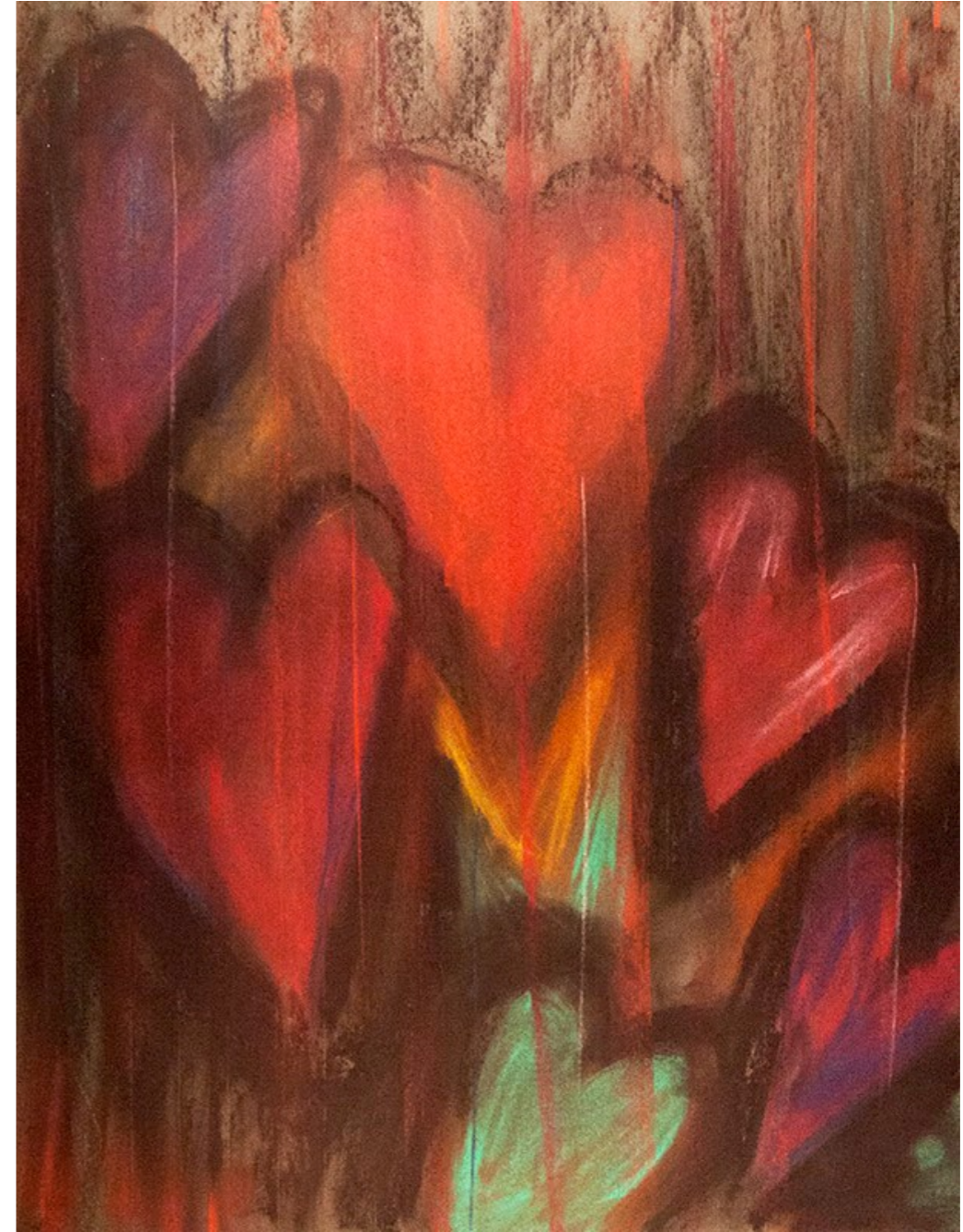


Figure 19. Ilona Kyngäs

## Using performance to engage the body and conquer the space

Combining verbal and visual expression with sound and movement is typical in various kinds of performances. Pembleton and Lajevic (2014, p. 41) wrote that performance art helps students make personal connections with art, stating: 'Embracing bodied experiences as a way to understand one's self and others, we are continually engaged in a process of becoming.' Horn (2009, 170) considers performance art and interactive experiences as catalysts for creative production and lateral thinking. I encourage students to use this approach and to show its results, for example, in meetings with pupils' parents and on stage in school festivities.

In another exercise, I asked students to construct new animals from natural materials and name the species (Image 20. *Examples of never-before-seen animals*, 2012). They performed the animal's locomotion and the sounds it made, and the rest of the group imitated them.

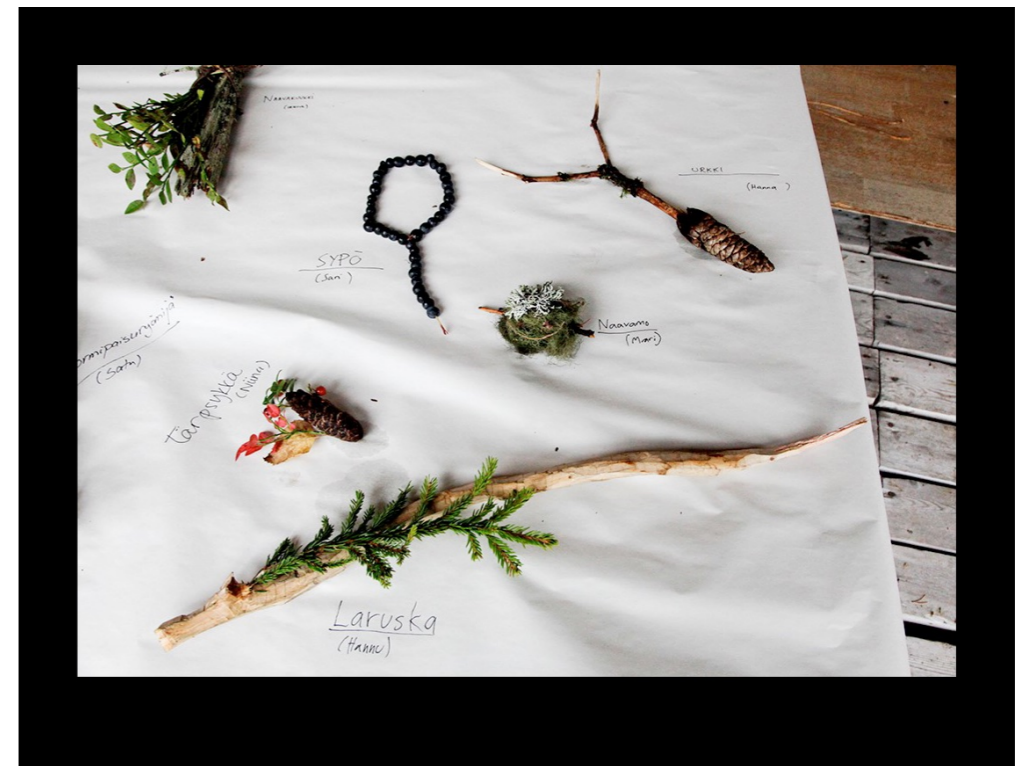


Figure 20. *Examples of never-before-seen animals*, 2012

In a related project, students pondered themselves and created a mask of the animal they would like to be, or one that could represent them (Images 21-23, 2012). They also used the mask in a performance where they turned themselves into the chosen animal.



Figure 21. Kati Oikarinen: *Reindeer mask*



Figure 22. Marika Annala: *Bear mask*



Figure 23. Ida Ala-aho: *Cat mask*

Performances can also be based on paintings made by students (Image 24. A group of students in 2004: *Blue-feeling paintings circling and swinging*). I introduced a project where an interdisciplinary group performance was based on the emotional experiences and ideas arising from the paintings (Ulkuniemi, 2007).

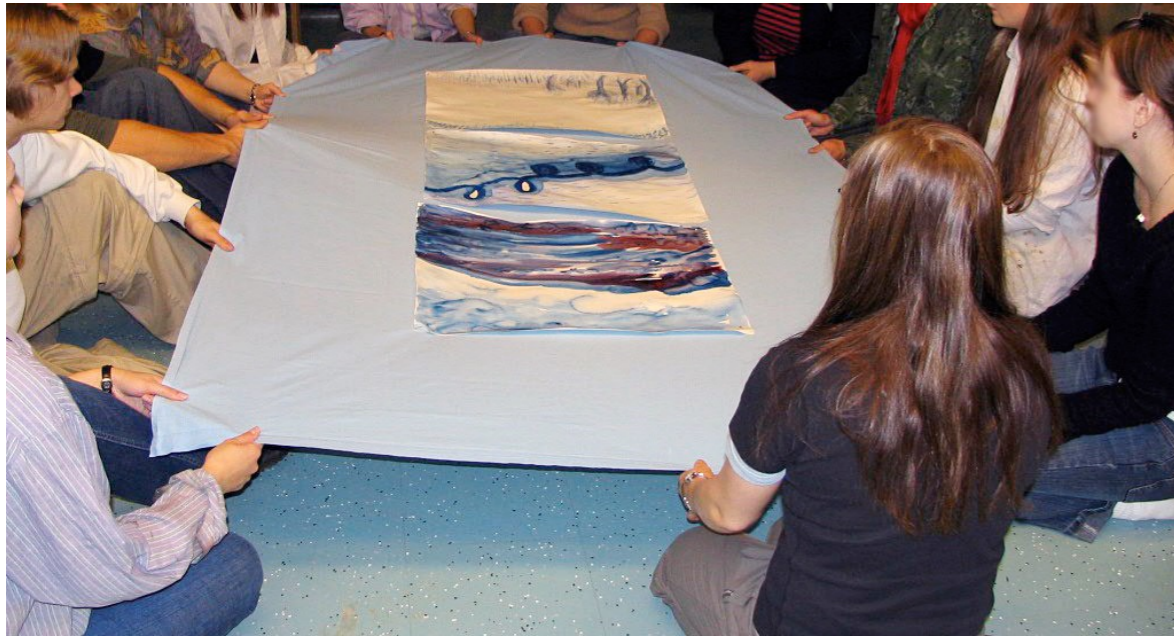


Figure 24. A group of students in 2004: *Blue-feeling paintings circling and swinging*

In a different camp, students first visited 'Nests of senses'—sites created by fellow students, and then made expressive paintings about the experience. Then, other students wrote words evoked by the paintings (Image 25. Päivi Sassi: *Painting based on her own and Hannu Ulvinen's nest, 2012.*) Finally, students created an individual performance based on a peer student's painting.

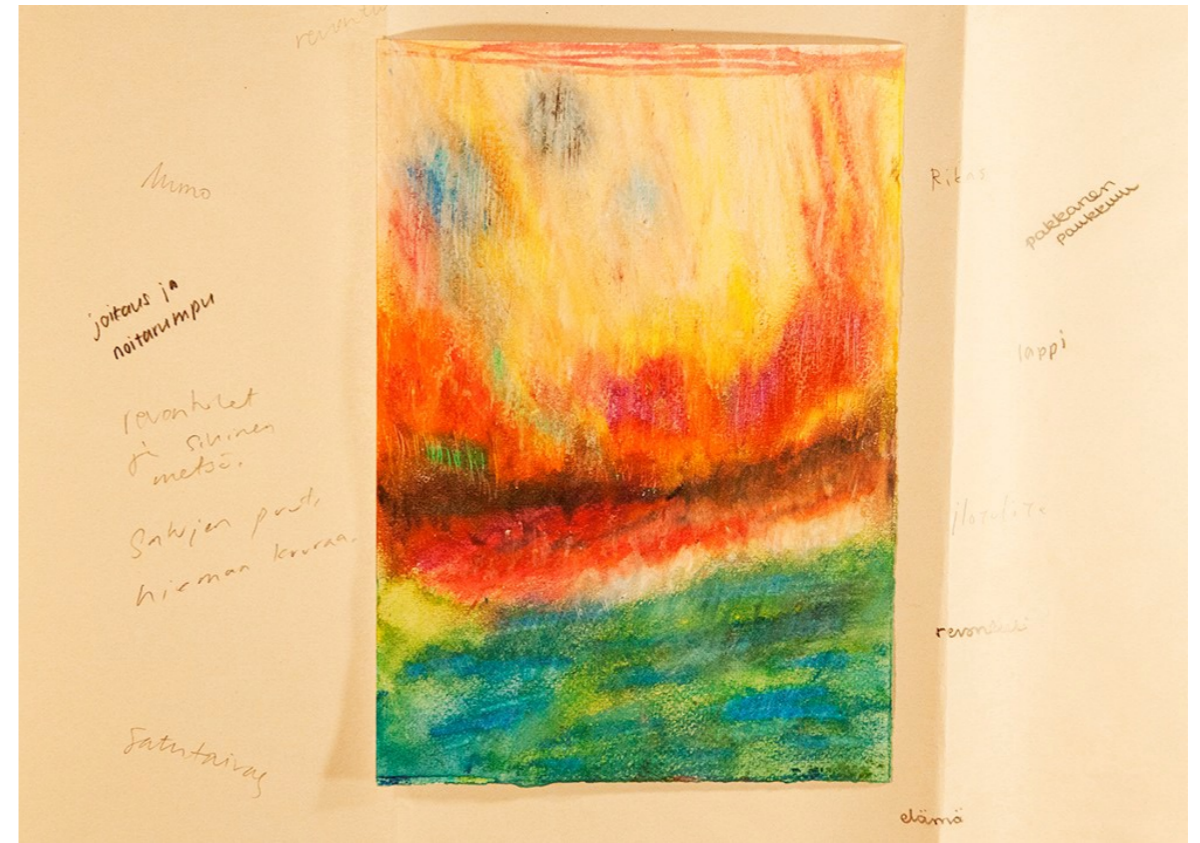
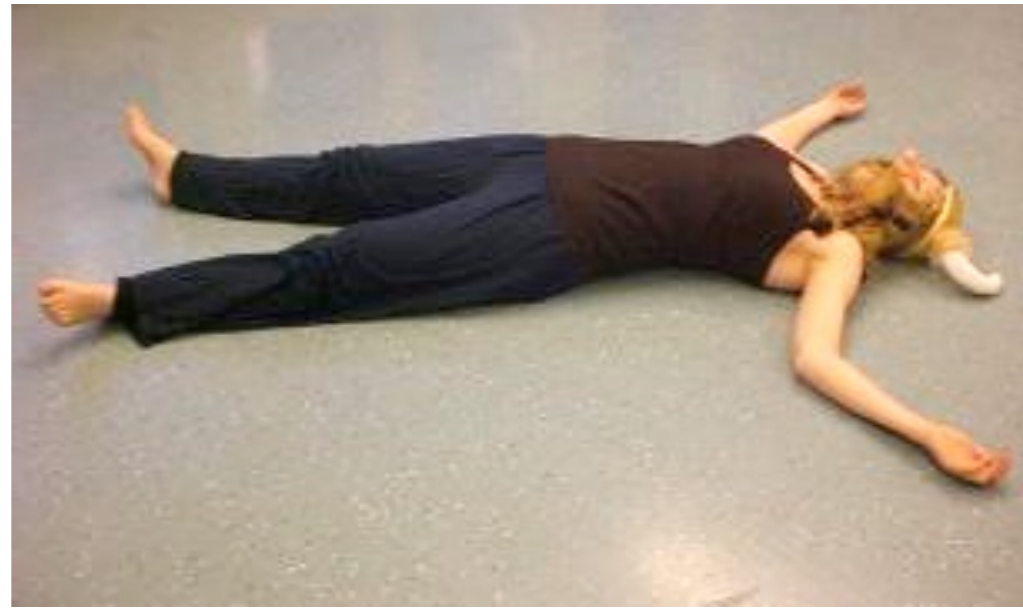


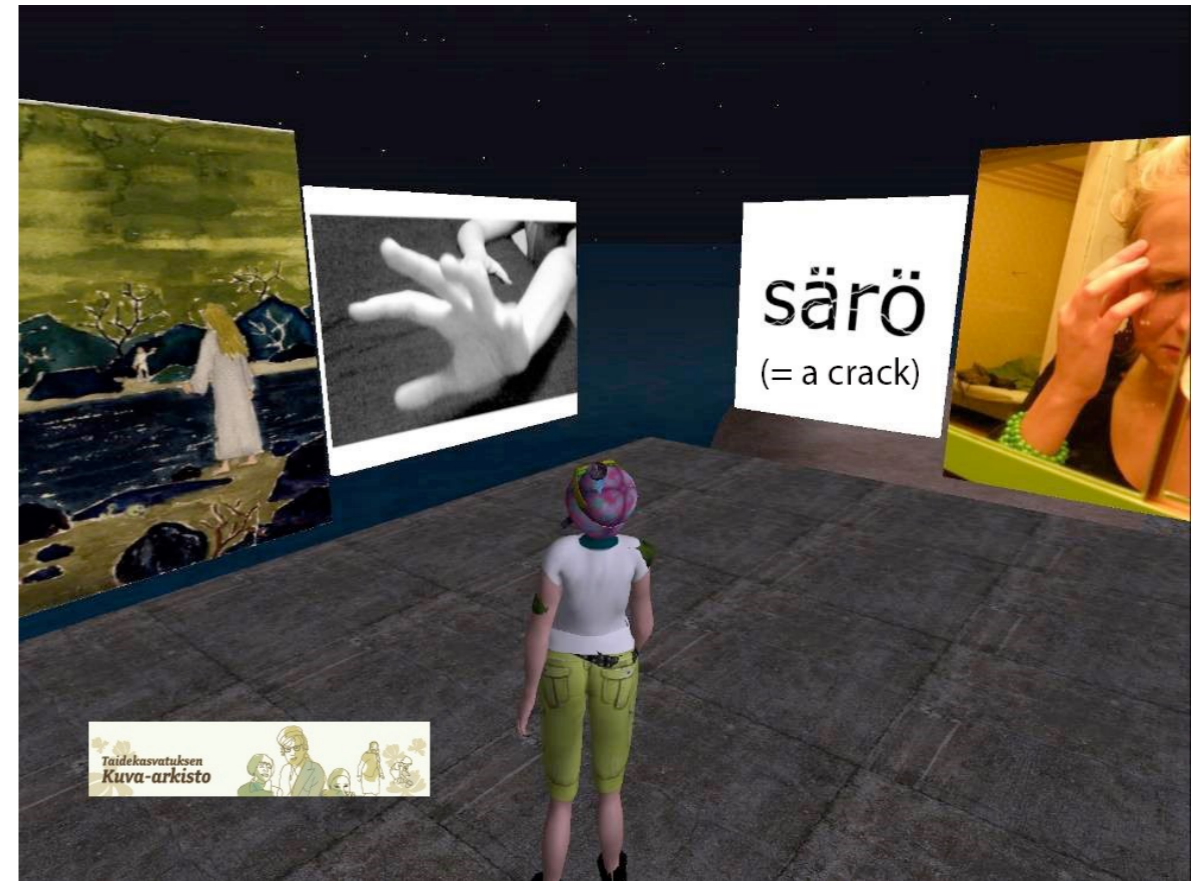
Figure 25. Päivi Sassi: *Painting based on her own and Hannu Ulvinen's nest, 2012*

Miho Shimohara and Kazuji Mogi from Japanese Kagoshima University taught my students how to make an emakimono, a story roll. The participants were offered costumes, and while playing a role, they were photographed (Images 26-28. Students taking roles under Viking theme, 2010). Finally, they collected the photos on a storyboard. I later added to this idea by combining the picture roll with a soundscape in a video.



Figures 26-28. *Students taking roles under Viking theme, 2010*

One co-operational experiment (Ulkuniemi & Holmberg, 2013) was performed in Second Life, an internet platform that offers interaction which may be more honest than face-to-face conversations, and raises questions about the meaning of virtual space (Taylor, Ballengee-Morris & Carpenter, 2010). Students first chose a pupil's work from the digital archive (Taidekasvatuksen, 2016). Then, they created a photo connected to the pupil's work. Finally, performing in the guise of their avatar, they shared and discussed the photos with students from a peer university who were also represented by avatars, creating a virtual exhibition opening (Images 29-30: *Computer screen shots from the opening of the Second Life exhibition, 2009*).



Figures 29-30: *Computer screen shots from the opening of the Second Life exhibition, 2009*

## The future is (at least partly) in the hands of future teachers

Student teachers who were taking art as a minor subject also did little projects in kindergarten classes, where they put their interart knowledge into practice (Images 31-32: *An infant painting when listening to a student drumming*, 2008).



Figures 31-32: *An infant painting when listening to a student drumming*, 2008

Unfortunately, only a few of my students have taken the optional 25 ETCS course in visual art education, even though, as future primary school teachers, they will be expected to teach almost all the compulsory visual art courses offered in Finnish comprehensive schools. They could also benefit from artistic approaches throughout the rest of the school day, if they are capable of recognizing that! To give everybody at least a hint of these possibilities, I will continue to use an interdisciplinary approach.

*All photographs but 26-28 (photographer unknown) were taken by the author.*



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