Participation and immersion into the cultural event: *Land Art*'s educational perspective

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Abstract: *The recent documents by the Culture and Education Committee clearly point out our society's commitment to developing a collective critical consciousness that could interact with cultural events and that could generate an “audience development”. This essay specifically presents a pedagogic view of this relationship, paying special attention to the audience’s role in connection with Land Art and with the environmental dimension.*

Riassunto: *Le recenti dichiarazioni a livello europeo indicano chiaramente l’impegno della nostra società a sviluppare una coscienza critica collettiva, che potrebbe interagire con eventi culturali e che potrebbe generare un “audience development”. Questo saggio presenta specificamente il punto di vista pedagogico di questa relazione, con particolare attenzione al ruolo del pubblico in relazione alla “Land Art” e con la dimensione ambientale.*

Keywords: Participation, Cultural event, Land art, Nature, Natural museum.

... nel mio lavoro mi piaceva immaginare di pormi in relazione con la vicenda naturale, senza recare offesa, senza cercare di prevarcarne il corso: sognavo di stabilire un colloquio, non di vantare un gesto. E il dialogo con la terra, il fiume, i vegetali mi accomunava nella volontà di crescere, di tendere a un cielo non più lontano, bensì fisicamente immanente.

(Giuliano Mauri)

1. Education, culture and participation

Education and culture base their coherence and efficiency on an idea of movement and dynamism; a positive and proactive nature which intent to leave a sign, to operate for the future and for its transformation. Moreover, both the terms are composed by an internal and an external dimension,
a double position of the actors taking part in the event: teacher and learner, artist and audience/spectator, all involved in a representation repeating over and over again and never similar to itself.

The cultural event (Cerri, 2008) is achieved within the boundaries of this encounter, and it offers a good/commodity which nurtures education and culture. The “event” explains its nature as a phenomenon of surfacing of cultural heritages and cultural veins belonging to each society and each territory, composed by works, ideas, shared values, narrations, way of being, behaving, and communicating. The word “cultural”, instead, proposes itself as a driving force for getting to know and triggering awareness, change, and reflection processes and as a potential vehicle for further social, productive, and economic phenomenons.

With time, together with the meaning of “cultural event”, also the relationship between it and the people (and the urban spaces and peripheral places they inhabit, as well) changes. Also the relationship between the position of education (and the places dedicated to it) and culture (and the “culture” of cultural assets and cultural events) substantially changes: if in the past the latter where fruition places – even if they were linked by design: planning processes – now education and cultural events merge into a commitment and opportunity relationship. School/education world can rightfully aim for taking the role of audience-consumer, actively working for the definition of contents, values, representations/depictions.

However, it seems not possible to elude the role of education in the “audience development”, in the building of an educational sensitivity to the cultural categories of aesthetics, ethics, and politics. The concept of “audience development” was discussed during the conference. «It was generally considered to be a more holistic term than, for example, concepts such as “cultural education”, “arts marketing” or “cultural inclusion”. “Access to culture” is a more rights based concept, while cultural education implies the implication of schools and linkage with educational curricula» (European Audience, 2012, 3). In a European context we can point out the experience of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, the oldest museum in Britain, which «explained how its major refurbishment in 2009 enabled it to profoundly transform its display strategies and to introduce new approaches to education activities and audience development. Visitor numbers tripled and the museum has increased its income» (Ivi, 10).

The first factor of transformation is the increasing variety of event types and of their location context. «Projects were presented from a wide range of
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sectors: live performing arts including dance, opera and theatre; the visual arts; film; literature; multimedia; heritage and interdisciplinary projects. The examples included work performed in more traditional and formal settings such as museums, theatres, cinemas and festivals, as well as projects in unconventional settings including old people's homes, schools, offices and some other very unusual public space such as farms or trolleybuses» (Ivi, 2). The dissemination brought by cultural events accompanies in this way the lifelong learning and conciliates the needs of formal, non formal and informal.

This type of approach to culture can have two positive effects: the development of creativity as a token of social responsibility; the reactivation of positive connections between people in social disadvantage and their life contexts.

Cultural events, that are creative, playful, social and democratic, «as well as bringing enjoyment, inspiration and personal fulfilment, cultural participation brings benefits to individuals’ creativity, something which is increasingly essential in a knowledge based society and has spillovers for other spheres of life, including people's working lives even if they are not employed in the cultural sector. For disadvantaged children and young people, it can help them reconnect to schooling and society» (Ivi, 4). It is important that the transformation of places changes the cultural products, the messages, the public, and the stakeholders, also approaching a new language for communication; «developing new audience development techniques, engaging in new repertory development methods, new production processes and new spaces, and making the most of new technology requires cultural institutions to rethink the skills they need, addressing questions such as do they retrain existing staff, do they recruit new staff or work in strategic partnerships with other sectors, such as ICT, retail, media and publishing, or a combination of approaches» (Ivi, 10).

2. Cultural event, place and nature

A cultural event expresses and translates the artistic and creative impetus into a social dimension, allowing everybody to access it, to see it, to ear it, to touch it. Thanks to the many studies in this field, we can now classify different kind of cultural events (Argano, Bollo, Dalla Sega, Vivalda, 2005, 22):
• conferences (conferences, seminars, panels, meetings, conventions);
• arts (installations, exhibitions, vernissage);
• historic and artistic heritage (events for cultural assets appraisal, cultural sites special opening times);
• architecture (openings, exhibitions);
• shows (festivals, retrospectives, concerts, award cerimonies, theatre performances);
• cinema, videos, multimedia (festivals, “premieres” and previews, special showing, installations and itineraries);
• television and radio (special broadcasts, Eurovisions, awards);
• literature (readings and public readings, books presentations, events in libraries or bookshops);
• environment (sites openings, opening parties and seasonal parties);
• territorial and touristic marketing (country festivals, folk and civilian celebrations, carnival shows, New Year’s Eve parties, opening cerimonies, fireworks festivals, historic revivals, contemporary parties, memorials);
• religion (religious festivals, processions, beatifications);
• sports (races and competitions, friendly matches);
• history and politics (agreements signing, meetings, authorities’ visits, investitures);
• marketing and communication (products promotions, benefits, award travels, trade fairs, special events);
• fashion (fashion shows, previews, presentations);
• community sector (fund raising campaigns, awareness events, parties and meetings, no-profit associations funding);
• Training and education (seminars, meetings, workshops).

Every kind of event finds its collocation into a context, a place (museum, cinema, theatre, square, etc.) that not only is an element of the planning, but also contributes to the definition of the emotional impact of the audience in relation to the event. Within the mainframe of an educational and didactic planning, the context acquires the shape of a highly structured learning environment, dependent on the resources at hand (which have already been made available or which were already available in that space). Teachers or educators, working with children, teenagers, adults or elders, should be able to access these places to link their interventions to the aims implied in every cultural event: to elevate persons, to stimulate reflection
and debate, to guarantee an inter- and intra-generational planning, to disseminate ideas and thoughts.

The place that most changed its shape in the course of time certainly is the museum (Falk, Dierking, 1992; Valentino, Delli Quadri, 2004; Cuisenier, Vibaek, 2008; Swarbrooke, Marini Clarelli, 2010) that progressively adjusted itself to the evolution of art forms, to the needs of the public, and to the requests coming from the city and the territory (Falk, Dierking, 1992).

The word “museum” «arises a combination of sensations, in part maybe irrational as well, anyway opposed to one another. On the one hand, the fact that it derives its name from the Muses’ one firmly links it to a cultural universe as remote as fascinating; however, on the other hand, the conception of museum as traditionally proposed to us recalls the memory of a dusty, faraway culture, lying in a position of privileged distance compared to the common man and thus accessible only to a small elite of men of learning» (Poldi Allai, 1991, 41). However, if the museum becomes the space around us, the most open, social and supportive space, the perspective deeply changes. Arts in nature is in a museum (Minucciani, 2005; Bottari, Pizzicannella, 2007; Bravo, 2007; Chiodi, 2010) that not only is a container, but also a generative and regenerating basin. From it come the materials, in it they compose, giving life to works and, sometimes, in these same works they “give way” to nature, being absorbed again from nature itself, which takes them back.

The relationship between visitor and museum (Mazzolini, 2002; Bollo, 2004) produces the creation of a personal and private world within a collective and public container. At least from the real potentialities point of view. With the passing of time, culture is defining itself as a «shared human experience» (Rifkin, 2001), that is, the entwining of shared human experiences that give a meaning to human existence. «The space of human can be found first of all in the dimension of nature. In it, as well, the worlds-of-intimacy, which also are worlds of bios, worlds of life, worlds of spirituality, worlds of logos, can be built» (Gennari, 2001, 642).

3. Land Art and education

The highest fusion between the viewer that is related to a cultural product and the human dimensions takes place when the art object and
its “container” merge. This occurs in nature, specifically in the Land Art (Tufnell, 2006), an artistic movement of the 60s and 80s of last century, which has changed the relationship between art, man and nature while calling for new coordinates.

Land art, Earthworks (word coined by Robert Smithson), or Earth art is an art form that is created into the nature, using natural materials such as soil, rock (bed rock, boulders, stones), organic media (logs, branches, leaves), and water with the introduction of materials such as concrete, metal, asphalt, mineral pigments. Sculptures are not placed in the landscape, but rather, the landscape is the mean of their creation. The works frequently exist in the open, located well away from civilization, left to change and erode under natural conditions. Many of the first works of Land art, created in the deserts of Nevada, New Mexico, Utah or Arizona, were ephemeral in nature and now only exist as video recordings or photographic documents.

The most important artistic works are:
- **a)** *Vault of Heaven*, Nederland (James Turrell);
- **b)** *Star Axis & Star Tunnel*, New Mexico (Charles Ross);
- **c)** *The art project “Manicure” in the Garden of Reason*, London (Caroline Wright);
- **d)** *Spiral Jetty*, Utah-USA (Robert Smithson);
- **e)** *Sun Tunnels*, Utah-USA (Nancy Holt);
- **f)** *Temporary drawings on sand*, USA (Jim Denevan).

The art is a vehicle to promote global communication and understanding and it helps the educators (Gourgiotou, Giannakou, Christidis, 2012) to better explain all about cultural and environmental matters (Kastner, Wallis, 1998, 2005). This is a kind of art that not only cares about nature and environment, but also about the people’s environmental awareness (Mantere, 1992; Stathopoulou, 1997; Krug, 1997). Environmental artworks are special projects where artists, scientists, teachers and students work together. The results are environmental art pieces created by the spirit of “ecology and sustainable development” (Grande, 1994; Andrews, 2006). The most important thing in environmental art is, that these actions have, at the same time and in the same place, an artistic and an ecologic meaning. So, environmental art belongs to both Art Education and Environmental Education (Stathopoulou, 1997).

Land art is to be understood as an artistic protest against the artificiality, the plastic aesthetics and the ruthless commercialization of art at the end
of the 1960s in America. Exponents of Land Art rejected museums or galleries as the setting of artistic activity and developed monumental landscape projects which were beyond the commercial art market. Land Art was also inspired by Minimal Art and Conceptual Art, but also by modern and minimal movements such as De Stijl, cubism, minimalism and the works of Constantin Brâncuși (Peştișani 1876 – Parigi 1957) and Joseph Beuys (Krefeld 1921 – Düsseldorf 1986).

The movement started in October 1968 with the group exhibition “Earth Works” at the Dwan Gallery in New York and the best known artist who worked in this genre was the American Robert Smithson (Passaic, 1938, Amarillo 1973), whose 1968 essay The Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects provided a critical framework for the movement as a reaction to the disengagement of Modernism from social issues. His best known piece, and probably the most famous piece of all Land Art, is the Spiral Jetty (1970), for which Smithson arranged rock, earth and algae so as to form a long (1500 ft) spiral-shape jetty protruding into Great Salt Lake in northern Utah.

Today, in most respects ‘Land Art’ has become part of mainstream public art and in many cases the term “Land Art” is misused to label any kind of art in nature even though conceptually not related to the avant-garde works by the pioneers of Land Art.

In a possible pedagogical perspective «what does emerge clearly from the projects and a growing body of research is that fostering longterm cultural participation among non-audiences and even potential audiences is most effective when the audience moves away from being a passive spectator to being an active participant in the creative process or cultural experience. Indeed, the cultural projects confirmed the growing phenomenon of participatory art, which recognises that artworks become alive first when a visitor sees, experiences and interacts, and is therefore the most empowering» (European Audience, 2012, 8).

4. Conclusions: an example of Land artist and of Land Art in Italy

An example of artistic realization in nature that also uses natural elements to take shape, certainly are the works of Giuliano Mauri (Lodi, 1938–2009). Starting from the “Plants Cathedral”, Mauri’s art represents all the strength of the materials he uses and of their representational power;
«it is a propelling and attracting centre with a strong cultural and environmental impact, and an evocative monument, entirely built with native vegetable material, according to the ancient art of weaving and of plant-based construction». His first “Plants Cathedral”, built in 2001 and based on an idea developped in over ten years of reflections and planning, now summons more than ten thousands visitors per year. A wooden cathedral composed by three naves supported by 80 columns made by entwined branches which enclose a young hornbeam that, while growing, will bear the testimony of the artistic idea and of the natural path shared by man. In this representation we can find many of the founding principles of environment pedagogy and educational planning. Land Art works and especially Mauri’s ones, express the attempt to give an answer to the needs of man, sometimes unexpressed or very difficult to express. This is also said in the first of the the Earth Charter (2000) general Principles, which asserts the role of environment in the mediation between men and the exercise of their rights, while defending the «dignity of all human beings and in the intellectual, artistic, ethical, and spiritual potential of humanity» (Earth Charter Commission, 2000).

Giuliano Mauri «perfectly fits in this kind of view (...) he worked with natural elements, with natural structures, with natural and environmental ideas (...) he was in an out-and-out communion with the surrounding reality, with the biotic context, with the net of life, to build fantastic but real works, fruit of a reflection but "alive"» (Righettini, 2011, 100).

The pedagogical and educational value of Giuliano Mauri’s works is given by the critical and experimental dimension of his art, by the relationship between art and architecture that he contantly seeks, by the balance between big inhabitable installations and the attention to the smallest details of everyday life. Starting just from these values, pedagogy, as in the past, takes possession of the environmental dimension to reveal «a new green awareness of the intrinsic value of the interdependence relationship between the natural world and human society» (Malavasi, 2008, 34) in all of its genre and generation components and in all of its dimensions (political, economic, social, cultural, formative, educational).

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References


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**External links:**

- Artist in Nature International Network (http://www.artinnature.org/)
- Australian land arts (http://www.land-arts.com/)
- Denarend.com - About land art (http://denarend.com/land_art/)
- EarthArtists.org - listings of Earth, Land, and Eco-artists. (http://www.earthartists.org/)
- Jacek Tylicki Land & Environmental Art projects (http://www.tylicki.com/)
- Land & Environmental Artists & Art (http://the-artists.org/MovementView.cfm?id=3E8DA10D-FCCE-4975-A80DA11B65BC4257)
- Land Arts of the American West (http://www.landarts.org/)
- Monumental Land Art of the United States (http://www.daringdesigns.com/earthworks.htm)
• Official UNM Land Arts of the American West Program Website (http://landarts.unm.edu/)
• Portail du Land Art (http://www.landarts.fr/)
• Robert Smithson (http://www.robertsmithson.com/earthworks/spiral_jetty.htm)
• Using Land art as a form of advertising (http://www.artfield.de/landartfield.html)