

ACQUISITION AND PLACEMENT OF PUBLIC ART IN HELSINKI ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The study endeavors to clarify the city of Helsinki's selecting of public art and placing of it in municipal elementary schools. The significance of the art-pedagogical aspects in the public art acquisition and decision-making was measured by clarifying the participation of schools and their users in the processes of art acquisition. The research question is as follows: are art-pedagogical perspectives present in the city's art acquisition process? In the study several employees of the Helsinki City Art Museum were interviewed and the Collection Policy Program of the Helsinki Art Museum 2012 (2013) was used as text material. The meaning structures of the theme interviews were analyzed and content analysis connected with institutional art theory was used, when analyzing the related text material. The study showed that public art is acquired for the Helsinki area elementary schools through percentage financing principle and as Helsinki Art Museum's own acquisitions for the Accessioned collection. In either acquisition models the students were commonly not heard in the decision-making process. Instead, teachers were listened to during the art acquisition process. Sometimes the curriculum of a school was reflected in the process. However, when the art acquisition solely by the Art Museum was in question the art-pedagogical activities took place more than in the case of percentage art acquisitions. The study suggests that students' possible learning from and about visual public art and esthetics in the school setting is enhanced when they themselves are involved in the process of public art acquisition, including the art- pedagogical activities.

Keywords: Public art, visual arts education, school environment

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1. Introduction

It has been stated that artworks located in the children's play and learning environment strengthen the self-esteem of the children and adolescents. Works of art often promote learning by inspiring. How well we learn is directly linked to where we learn (Ehmann & Borges 2012). In other words, having an effective learning environment is crucial. Investigating works of art in school settings, such as flexible, informal, and temporary installations and exhibits as well as more formal and permanent works of art, offers further perspectives on the rapidly evolving topic of how best to learn in the new millennium (compare *ibid.*).

There is a significant collection of art placed in public environment. In earlier study of Myllyntaus (2012) public sculptures of the city of Jyväskylä had consequential value also due to their inherent value. In connection with the art educational task, the sculptures displayed in different areas of the municipality - outside galleries and art museums - make the public more familiar with visual arts and the visual environment. According to Myllyntaus (2012) was considered essential to distribute art democratically, challenge the general public with abstract art to art installed in public places and make especially children acquainted with the visual environment and aesthetic appreciation.

There are many recent studies which prove the important meaning of art education in school curriculum and the many possibilities of using the public art as a tool in arts education (Efland, 2002, 2004; Koed, 2005; Heilig, Cole & Aquilar, 2010; Myllyntaus 2012).

The article, which supports a doctoral dissertation in Education for the University of Helsinki entitled *The art- pedagogical aspects in public artwork acquisition – the impacts of acquiring, placing and experiencing public art in Helsinki Elementary Schools*, resolves the participation of students in the processes of acquiring and placing public art in the of Helsinki elementary schools. The article presents an analysis and conclusions based on the initial theme interviews conducted at the Helsinki Art Museum in spring 2013.

The Helsinki Art Museum's art collections are characterized by a significant proportion of public art. Forty percent of the Helsinki Art Museum's entire collection of 8700 works of art is sited in common city areas, near streets and in parks and in communal offices and institutions. It means that in addition to outdoor sculptures, public art is featured in public buildings such as schools in the city of Helsinki. Why is this? The Collection policy program of the Helsinki Art Museum 2012 claims that by placing visual arts in public places the city art museum brings visual arts to people's everyday lives.

Since early 1990s the percentage financing principle has been observed in Helsinki by the Helsinki Public Works Department and the Helsinki City Planning Department. The

percentage financing principle means that around one percent of the building costs of a location is reserved for the acquisition and installation of an art work. The city has placed 44 percentage financed artworks in elementary schools and 21 in day-care centers since 1990's. At present most of the percentage financing artworks is carried out into the day care centers and the elementary schools. Indeed, an important aspect of the Helsinki Public Works Department and the Helsinki City Planning Department's choice of locations is that of art education.

As could be supposed, the Helsinki Art Museum operates as an art expert in percentage funding projects. The work is carried out in cooperation with the artist and the building's designers, constructors and future users.² Additionally, the Museum commissions an average of three new public artworks each year. These are added to the Museum's collection of public art.

2. Problem Statement

The study generally considers institutional art. A starting point is the institutional theory of art in the context of museums and art collections being significant introducers and definers of the visual arts. According to the institutional theory of art, works of art are art appointed by the art world, the core of which is formed by artists and the audience. The art philosopher and art institutionalist Marcia Muelder Eaton claims that what is special in the works of art is our way of handling them: we protect, respect and display them, and this special treatment in particular distinguishes a work of art from an ordinary object (Eaton 1988).

Another theoretical approach in the thesis considers learning theory. For example, emeritus professor of art and education Elliot Eisner (1991) suggests that children can use art to question and reflect on the multisensory information in their daily lives, and from this reflection develop insight awareness and critical thinking skills. According to Eisner (1991) one can learn and develop creative thinking in many fields through art as well. Above raises a question of the past, present and future role of arts in school and what visual works of art placed in schools signify for their receivers.

3. Research Methods

I measured the significance of the art-pedagogical aspects in the public art acquisition and decision-making by clarifying the participation of schools and their users in the processes of art acquisition; can schools and their users influence to the processes of public

art acquisition. Hence, I clarified the decision-makers and statement givers in the given school-bound public art.

I gathered new data by theme interviewing three officials of the Helsinki City Art Museum in a group. At large, the themes discussed were collection operations and museum education in relation to the public art. The interviewees were Head of Education Taru Tappola and Curator of Education Lotta Kjellberg, who have been in charge of museum education activities in the Helsinki Art Museum for more than five years. The third interviewee was Collection Assistant Satu Oksanen, who has involved in the preparation and execution of the art acquisitions for several years. I investigated the latest The Collection policy program of the Helsinki Art Museum 2012 (2013), public art acquisitions and projects done with elementary school classes in Helsinki. I analyzed the meaning structures of these theme interviews and used the institutional art theory connected content analysis, when analyzing the related text material.

4. Findings and conclusions

On the basis of the content analysis of the interviews and the Collection Policy Program the objective of the public art acquisition in the city is to have the significant contemporary works of art on display to the widest possible public.

In reference to percentage financing of arts the users of the building are invited to the meetings where the acquisition process is being furthered along with the members from the Art Museum, the architect of the location and the municipal commissioner of project such as Real Estate Office. Interestingly, the teachers have been listened to in the art acquisition process in the City of Helsinki and students are replaced in the process by the teachers so far. The process proceeds so that the Art Museum suggests about three proposals by artists for users and representatives of school institutions. Followed by the selection of the artist, the artist might have more profound conversations with the teachers about the artwork designed for the location. It is noteworthy that the Helsinki Art Museum attempts to guarantee the freedom of the artist. The curator of Education Lotta Kjellberg mentioned: “The Art Museum does not dictate artist to do something already defined. Artists have the freedom to do their own work”. When the project solely by the Art Museum is in question there is no straightforward operations model. The museum functions more autonomously, but on the other hand it reflects more the recipients’ perspective and art- educational viewpoints. The head of Education of the museum Taru Tappola argues that one of the functions of the museum pedagogy is to engage students to artworks. According to her the aim is to make the relation between audience and art collections and exhibitions fluent. Collection assistant Satu

Oksanen summarizes that the museum wishes that the “relation created to the artworks by pupils would be respectful, valuable and important and that artworks would be considered as art and their own ones”. For example, one prospective project of the museum in Lauttasaari Elementary School is a pedagogical project of conservation, in which school class participates in the protection of a battered mural in the school wall.

Evans and Stecker (2003) have revealed displayed helplessness as a result of uncontrollable environmental stressors. Not only do students display learned helplessness because of their “mistaken belief that they are incapable of influencing their environment,” but they also experience difficulties learning new tasks (Evans and Stecker 2003). In reference to earlier mentioned I conclude that students’ possible learning strengthens in case student themselves – not solely teachers – take part in the decision-making, planning and making of public artworks in the school context. The study concludes that students’ possible learning from and about visual arts and aesthetics in school setting strengthen in case students themselves take part in the activities around public art in the school context. The further research question is what surplus value the public art could bring to the elementary school as a learning environment and possibly to basic education; how can pedagogy be developed with the methods of public art. The whole further research would be the clarification of the similarities between the activities and meanings around public artworks in schools and the ones outside school environment such as individual oriented, expressive, and spontaneous artworks in public space such as graffiti.

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