

REVIEW

A review of “*Ecoart in Action: Activities, Case Studies and Provocations for Classrooms and Communities*”

Geffen, A., Rosenthal, A., Fremantle, C., and Rahmani, A. (Eds). (2022). *Ecoart in action: Activities, case studies and provocations for classrooms and communities*. New Village Press.

Review Author

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This book is, as the editors explain “a collection of activities, case studies and provocations that addresses ecosystem problems and responds to the urgent environmental crises of our time through art” (p.xix). It is designed for educators, students from a range of educational contexts, and those working with communities (human and other). Its content is compiled from members of the Ecoart Network, an online group dialogue that has, for more than twenty years, actively explored the role of art in response to ecological concerns. The book provides a range of quality activities and approaches to teaching eco art, supported by theory and in some cases policies. There is a wide variety of activities and suggestions which experienced educators could adapt and adjust for different educational contexts and communities around the world.

In the introduction section art movements and activities were referred to quite generally but as there are many diverse eco art practices in the world and in our histories, I was looking for citations to support this field of practice. I also found the comment that Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) “is slowly evolving into STEAM” strange as Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Mathematics (STEAM) has been around for close to 20 years with many of us who used to work in that space moving on from it as we find deeper transdisciplinary or “hypertransdisciplinary” (Wise, 2023, np) phenomena. However, as I read the book, I wondered if the editors were referring to how the examples in this very book as a collection offered some new insights into STEAM together because I think they certainly do that with such a diverse and contemporary offering of eco art practice.

Section 1 documents 25 activities that offer varied approaches to educating about the environment, ecologies and our relationships with nature as eco art education experiences. These are teaching and learning activities that range from quite commonly practiced art making approaches such as working with sustainable or natural materials and the exquisite corpse concept, through to activities that encourage students to engage with nature, explore eco concerns and work collaboratively. Some are stronger and richer than others. I was impressed with *The Inventory of Obstacles and Concerns* by Samantha DiRosa which enables students to share obstacles they might have with the natural world, frustrations and fears then “reframing of problems into opportunities, which students use as a springboard to eco-art projects later” (p.46). Beth Grossman’s *Exploring Performance and Installation Practices in an Eco Art Curriculum* offers

rich teaching and learning having evolved from “a one-month intensive workshop . . . for graduate students in the Live Arts programme at the University of the Arts in Helsinki, Finland” (p.55). In this article, existing artists’ work and practices are used by students to “research and learn from pioneering environmental artists whose practices were community-engaged and site-specific” (p.55) then develop this research through their own reflective practice and artmaking.

The authors in Section 1 provide clear instructions about the conceptual development of the 25 teaching and learning activities, as well as reflective activities and conclusion tasks. Whilst some are designed for children and others for adults at tertiary level, many of these activities could be adjusted for other age groups. These 25 activities could also all be used and adapted in different ways to suit various curricula around the world, therefore would be of use internationally. It was therefore a little disappointing that the book references USA-specific things like, “The First Amendment to the Constitution” which assumes all readers are aware of. Such references could have been explained a little to acknowledge potential international readers.

As an academic teaching and researching at tertiary level, I found Section 2 and 3 very interesting and particularly useful for academic teaching/research. As the editors explain, Section 2 includes “*twenty-six examples of specific projects, courses, or programs. Each provides enough information for readers to replicate or create a similar experience, while also offering historical contexts, rationales, and methodologies that contextualize eco art practice.*” These were indeed very well researched and the range of insights and approaches this section covered offers a thorough understanding of what eco art is.

Section 3 steps up again into more of a theoretical and conceptual framing of eco art so that by the end of reading this book, I was left with a wider understanding of how we can and need to engage with both the environment and art to research, learn and understand interconnections of self, place, environment and ecologies. As Tim Collins and Reiko Goto Collins point out in their chapter *Art and Aesthetics: A deliberative approach in Scottish Forests*, “Art does not fix things, solve problems or predict change” but rather art “has a very particular kind of agency, one that creates space for comment and discussion, producing surprising changes to extant concepts and experiences” (p.147)

Even though Collins and Collins are the ones who explain environmental aesthetics in the context to their case study, as a whole, the book could be said to also be an education in environmental aesthetics as most of the activities provide opportunity to engage with the environment in empathic ways and /or explore our relationships with the natural environment, nature and ecologies. There are insights into bodies in space and place, activism and meditative practice through to engaging relevant, carefully considered materials and their properties in context (materiality). Reading through all the activities, the book taught me about how place is often a theme through which students can explore the more than human.

The book provided me with new ideas about activities I could use or adapt in my own teaching. I think this book would be of most use to experienced educators as some of the activities require creative adaptations for different cohorts and contexts. However, most of the activities are explained very well with clear instructions about materials needed and prompt questions to ask so could also be used by inexperienced educators or facilitators running workshops.

As each chapter is written by a different author, there are different writing styles throughout the book that can take a bit of getting used to. This is not a problem though given this is the type of book that you would not necessarily sit down and read in one sitting from cover to cover/front to back. It is the kind of book that you are likely to pick up and read sections in preparation for designing and facilitating eco art workshops. The common structure for each chapter, with headings such as overview, objectives, goals or rationale, conclusion, gives the book some consistent structure to use in this way.

Overall I was really impressed with this book. It is a rich collection of approaches to eco art teaching, learning, thinking and experiencing. The richness clearly comes from the book having evolved from the Ecoart Network members who have volunteered their time and energy to help

shape this book since 2018. I commend these authors and editors for such a generous sharing of examples of work, activities and case studies for us to all learn from and make use of in our own practices as we work together to make the world a better place.

Reference

Wise, K. (2023). The Interdisciplinary Imagination. *Keynote, Faultlines INSEA Conference*, September 2023, Canakkale, Turkiye.

Author Biography

Shelley Margaret Hannigan (Phd) is a practicing visual artist, art educator and researcher. She works as a Senior Lecturer in Art Education at Deakin University dividing her time between supervising Masters and Phd students in their research, conducting her own research projects and teaching. Her two main research projects currently involve environmental education in schools using the arts and researching the formation and function of wellbeing programs in school contexts. She also engages her own arts-practice-led research and exhibits or curates an exhibition each year from this work. She has published her research in over 30 book chapters or academic papers.

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