

# **Redefining the Sense of Self: How Art Educators Can Help Save the Earth**

*Ralph Randall Hall*

## **ABSTRACT**

By treating society and the environment as objects of manipulation and exploitation, the human community has caused unprecedented world wide environmental degradation. Behaviors associated with manipulation and exploitation of the natural world can be traced to a form of modern consciousness that perceives the individual to be separate and disconnected from others and the environment. This paper discusses the potential of art educators to foster a redefinition of the "sense of self," whereby an individual may develop an *ecological consciousness* informed by a new perception of the world, a new visual awareness of the interconnectedness and interdependence that exists among all beings and things.

The fostering of *ecological consciousness* is discussed in terms of a tripartite model of the self and the holistic ways of thinking which define ecological awareness. Interdisciplinary curriculum strategies for art educators may be developed by focusing upon integrating the three domains of understanding, locating commonality and promoting identification with nature. Included in this discussion is an examination of several traditional and contemporary works of visual art, including the installation work of Sally Packard. The paper concludes with a discussion of dominant trends in the history of art education, the process of information exchange within the field, and a call for the development of an ecological vision.

## KEY WORDS

art educators

ecological consciousness

environment

interconnectedness

nature

sense of self

transpersonal

holistic unfoldment

"vision"

wisdom



In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the human community has tended to treat society and the environment as objects of manipulation and exploitation. This behavior has caused unprecedented world wide environmental degradation and has engendered what has commonly come to be known as the environmental crisis. This crisis is distinctive because the actions of modern civilization presently threaten the health and survival of the biosphere and its living communities. According to reliable estimates we have, at best, thirty or forty years left to significantly change our behavior before we will be faced with irreversible environmental disaster (Ruther, 1992). One opinion expressed by eco-philosophers is that in order to seriously address the environmental crisis, the human community must first reach mutual understanding and agreement about the crisis (Wilber, 1996). That is, we need to reach collective, democratic, consensual agreement upon the nature and degree of the crisis before we can formulate a decisive plan of action and act upon it (Wilber, 1996). In this regard, an important task is the development of consciousness, or a redefinition of the "sense of self," This means fostering a shift from an alienated "sense of self," marked by feelings of disconnection, isolation, and estrangement, to a related "sense of self" that recognizes intrinsic connection to others and the natural world. Facilitating this change, the human community should be able to comprehend the crisis more clearly and potentially reach mutual agreement as to how best to effect its solution.

Can art educators contribute to this plan to redefine the "sense of self"? I believe they can. Consequently, the purpose of this discussion will be to investigate several questions related to this agenda. First, considering the global environmental crisis and our need to foster a greater degree of connection to the natural world, what is the "sense of

self” that an art educator should bring to the classroom and nurture through teaching and curriculum design? Second, what kinds of practices would facilitate the shift from the alienated to the related “sense of self” in the art classroom? Third, why, and in what ways could this form of art education aid our future survival?

In speaking to the first question, I will present a tripartite model of the self, based upon common psychological understandings of the “sense of self,” and then suggest a form of *ecological consciousness* that educators should aspire to nurture among their students. While discussing the second question, I will set forth several practices that potentially can assist in facilitating the desired shift in consciousness. These are an integration of the three domains of understanding associated with the history of ideas and methods for promoting identification with the natural world. Finally, in regard to question three, I will discuss the concept of “vision” in the field of art education and how given the threat of the environmental crisis this could assist in aiding our future survival. Therefore, let us begin with the concept of the “sense of self.”

### The Conception of Self

In the wake of the global environmental crisis and our need to foster a greater degree of connection between the natural world and ourselves, what is the “sense of self” that an art educator should bring to the classroom and nurture through teaching and curriculum design? To begin to answer this question it is important to establish a model of the “sense of self.”

A fairly common notion, within the field of psychology, is that the “sense of self” is based upon a tripartite conception of the self (Fox, 1990). Freud has used the terms *id*, *ego*, and *superego* to designate the parts of the self. In like manner, transactional analysis has set forth the *child*, the *adult*, and the *parent* as categories of the self. Generally speaking however, we can say within an individual there exists a *desiring-impulsive* aspect, a *normative-judgmental* aspect, and a *rationalizing-deciding* aspect of the self (Fox, 1990). This means, that our holistic “self concept” is actually composed of three types of selves.

The characteristics of these selves are as follows: The *desiring-impulsive* aspect is that self that wants things immediately. Consequently, this aspect of the self functions with little regard for others, the future, or the constraints of reality (Fox, 1990). The *normative-judgmental* aspect of the self is that part that sets standards and expects the attainment of them, be they goals, activities, or moral behavior. It also functions to judge the other aspects of the self as to whether we achieve or fail to achieve its expectations (Fox, 1990). The *rationalizing-deciding* aspect is that part of the personality that makes the decisions. It functions as the locus of control which mediates between the demands of the *desiring-impulsive* aspect and the expectations of the *normative-judgmental* aspect, along with the constraints of reality (Fox, 1990).

In considering this tripartite model of the "sense of self" it is possible to discern many of our common responses to the environmental crisis. The *desiring-impulsive* aspect of the self corresponds to our unrestrained exploitation of the environment and our notions of unlimited progress without regard for others, the future, or the constraints of reality (Fox, 1990). The *normative-judgmental* aspect corresponds to our idealistic ideas that seek to establish protection of the environment, irrespective of the demands of the *desiring-impulsive* self or the necessities of reality (Fox, 1990). The *rationalizing-deciding* aspect of the self is related to our efforts to mediate between total exploitation and unrealistic idealism (Fox, 1990). Therefore, this aspect corresponds to efforts to conserve, preserve, and restore the environment. However, being the rational aspect, this part of the self attempts to "rationalize" the environmental crisis. That is, it forms an anthropocentric position that seeks to maximize the use of the environment without totally harming or destroying it (Fox, 1990).

What this model of the "sense of self" suggests is that humans generally act in accordance with self-interest. That is, they either give into the demands of the *desiring-impulsive* self, aspire to an ideal proscribed by the *normative-judgmental* self, or rationalize a compromise between the two, worked out by the *rational-deciding* self. The crucial issue in regards to this process is that below these aspects of the self

there exists an even deeper, fundamental “sense of self” which includes all three aspects, regardless of which ones we allow to predominate. For most people, this deep “sense of self” is narrow, particle like, and perceived to be separate from others and the natural world.

If we take our potentials for care and concern to be related to self interest, and that self interest is related to a narrow, rather than an expansive “sense of self,” then it is unlikely we can engender genuine care and concern for the world at large. The reason is, destruction of the environment can always be rationalized in terms of human needs and desires. Further, attempts to impose care and concern are generally unpopular and rarely successful. It appears that people grow tired of hearing how they should protect the environment, displaying apathy and a tendency to revert to familiar abusive habits.

However, if we can promote a more expansive or *transpersonal* “sense of self” then care and concern can flow naturally and spontaneously. For example, if our “sense of self” is narrow we generally care only about ourselves. If our “sense of self” extends to include family or friends, then we are readily willing to extend care and concern to them. Our “sense of self” can even expand to include larger abstract entities, such as our neighborhood, town, city, state, or nation. We also are able to extend care and concern to these entities. If we could expand our “sense of self” to include all of nature, then care and concern for the environment would be spontaneous, genuine, and effective. Such a *transpersonal* approach articulates the position of eco-philosophers associated with the *deep ecology* movement in environmentalism. Arne Naess, the leading figure in this movement states:

Care flows naturally if the “self” is widened and deepened so that protection of free nature is felt and conceived as protection of ourselves . . . Just as we need not morals to make us breathe . . . (So) if your “self” in the wide sense embraces another being, you need no moral exhortation to show care . . . You care for yourself without feeling any moral pressure to do it—provided you have not succumbed to a neurosis of some kind, developing self destructive tenden-

cies, or hating yourself. (Naess, 1986)

This expansive *transpersonal* identification of the “sense of self” to include the whole of nature has widely been termed *ecological consciousness*. Such consciousness is characterized by a sense of relatedness or connection to the earth, its forces, and its living communities. It is a form of consciousness that allows for the needs of the tripartite structure of the self to enter harmoniously into the needs of Nature and the planet.

In practice such consciousness is marked by the virtue of humility, the application of care and concern, and the envisioning and enactment of holistic ways of thinking which promote the health and preservation of the environment. When successfully realized this consciousness will allow us to move beyond the isolated, egocentric, anthropocentric, economically oriented vision that has created the environmental crisis. Therefore, it is precisely this “sense of self,” characterized by *transpersonal ecological consciousness* that art educators should bring into the classroom and nurture through teaching and curriculum design. In this regard, let us proceed to consider practices that can facilitate the shift from the alienated narrow “sense of self” to the related or expansive “sense of self” in the art classroom.

### Practices to Facilitate Ecological Consciousness

In consideration of practices that can facilitate the shift from an alienated to a related “sense of self” in the art classroom, I would like to suggest two major concepts. One, an approach to learning geared toward integrating the three major domains of understanding associated with the history of ideas. Second, methods applicable to locating commonality and promoting identification of the “sense of self” with nature.

### Integrating the Three Domains of Understanding

Broadly speaking, humanity has sought to understand reality in terms of three major domains: One, interior subjective experience, two, collective community experience, and three, objective empirical analy-

sis of nature. These three may be thought of as an attention to the "I," "We," and "It" categories of experience (Wilber, 1996). Further, this triad represents the major concerns of the history of ideas and can be articulated as a search for "Beauty," "Goodness," and "Truth" (Wilber, 1996).

Up until the dawn of the enlightenment these domains were undifferentiated. That is, the search for "Beauty," "Goodness," and "Truth" was lumped together largely under the watchful and collective mantle of the church. At this time these three categories were absorbed into a single, yet limiting vision of reality. However, with the success of the Enlightenment came a differentiation of these categories, and "Art," "Morals" (Religion), and "Science" were separated in an effort to clarify and purify these realms of experience and understanding. This separation generated an explosive growth in science, particularly in terms of technical know-how. Yet, this growth also devalued and distanced the realms of "Art" and "Morals," the experience of the "I" and "We" from our understandings of reality. With the advent of the "modern" era, science or empirical claims to truth eclipsed the other two ways of knowing and assumed a dominant status in our society. Without serious consideration given to the "I" or "We" experiences of reality, Nature became to be understood as the central other, and was defined as the essential "It" of experience (Wilber, 1996). Devalued from relation to the "I" and "We" categories, Nature became subject to extreme exploitation, a mere source of instrumental value to be used and abused as needed.

To add to this development "modernism" also generated the emancipated individual and therefore assisted in a further form of differentiation, namely the "I" from the "We" and the "It" categories. Ironically, one of the great boons of "modernism," the emergence of democratic ideals, has distanced humanity from a full balanced consideration of reality.

Together, the devaluing of nature by science and the emancipation of the individual have produced a distinctive form of "modern" consciousness exhibiting an egocentric, anthropocentric, autonomous, spectator form of awareness that is distanced from others and the natu-

ral world. This form of consciousness has largely been responsible for the pervasive trend to treat society and the environment as objects of manipulation and exploitation.

Consequently, a major practice that can facilitate a shift from an alienated to a related "sense of self" in the art classroom is an attention to integrating the "I," "We," and "It" categories of experience. Art educators can best achieve this goal by implementing comprehensive, interdisciplinary curricula that present holistic learning experiences, drawing inspiration from the history of ideas which has occupied itself with a search for "Beauty," "Goodness," and "Truth."

Recent reform movements in art education such as *Discipline Based Art Education* (D.B.A.E.) present viable models for such integration. *Discipline Based Art Education* is a contemporary content oriented approach to art education that introduces students to the four foundational disciplines that contribute to the understanding of art: art production, art history, art criticism, and aesthetics. Within this structure, D.B.A.E. encourages the inclusion of resources from a variety of other fields, such as literature, history, music, and science. By structuring learning experiences around conceptual issues, D.B.A.E. promotes the investigation of the domain of art in terms of the "I," "We," and "It" categories of experience.

For example, a learning experience can be structured around the concept of art and the environment. A key work of art such as Mel Chin's *Revival Field* (1990) could be chosen as the locus of investigation. Chin's *Revival Field* is a site specific, ecological artwork that attempts to demonstrate a safe and natural means to clean up toxic waste from the soil by incorporating the unique ability of certain plants to absorb heavy metals through their vascular systems (Matilsky, 1992). Utilizing the D.B.A.E. model students can study *Revival Field* in terms of the four disciplines of art, producing their own site specific ecological work, researching the history of ecological art, analyzing contemporary criticism pertaining to such work, and finally considering how *Revival Field* functions as art.

Another D.B.A.E. learning experience could be structured around the vital concept of social engineering and how it has engendered atti-

tudes toward the environment. In this regard the installation work of Sally Packard might be chosen as a central artwork for investigation. In *Mediated American Psyche: New World Inheritance, Old World Legacy*, Packard presents three-dimensional objects and video inspired by the writings and drawings of European discoverers, explorers and settlers. Packard's presentation is geared toward exposing the environmental impact associated with America's European social, political, and philosophical inheritance. Again, utilizing the D.B.A.E. model, students could study *Mediated American Psyche: New World Inheritance, Old World Legacy* in terms of the four disciplines of art. As a group, students could produce an ecologically focused gallery installation inspired by investigation into the impact of European thought upon American culture. Students could investigate the political history of America and learn how this was expressed in characteristic American styles of landscape painting. Further, students could investigate the critical writings of enlightenment philosophers such as Descartes and Kant; the political perspectives of Thomas Jefferson; and the philosophical expressions of the American Transcendentalists. Finally, students could again discuss how *Mediated American Psyche: New World Inheritance, Old World Legacy* and similar works function as Art.

What is significant about the D.B.A.E. approach is that it allows for the incorporation of resources from others fields, such as literature, history, political science, philosophy, and science. Thus, while investigating the concept of art and the environment, students could be exposed to information pertaining to the history of the environmental movement, environmental ethics, and even contemporary developments in science that argue for a "systems" view of reality. Combining the study of art with resources from these related fields can contribute to the integration of the "I", "We", and "It" categories of experience and help foster the development of *ecological consciousness* among students. Let us now consider a second major practice that can facilitate the shift from an alienated to related "sense of self" in the art classroom.

### Locating Commonality and Promoting Identification with Nature

Because the development of *ecological consciousness* is depen-



own areas, such as gardens, parks, wilderness areas, wildlife preserves, or state and national monuments. Additionally, students could be encouraged to create works of art, which enliven the unique character of these places. Production, performance, exhibition, analysis, and discussion could all be associated with the pilgrimage experience allowing for an opportunity for students to correspond and collaborate with natural phenomena or forces occurring in these places. In this way a sense of *personal commonality* or identification with natural entities could be fostered among students.

*Ontologically* based commonality and identification experiences could be promoted in the art classroom by an investigation of works of art associated with the contemplative or meditative experience of Nature. Indeed, an art educator might structure a D.B.A.E. learning experience around the exploration of traditional cultural artifacts or rituals that seek to promote an intuitive connection to Nature. For example, an art educator can investigate the traditional form of Japanese aesthetic practice known as "Wabi Sabi." "Wabi Sabi" is primarily concerned with facilitating contemplative ways of seeing and thinking about existence that enable an individual to experience the "non-dual" character of reality and realize union with nature. Art educators could select the Japanese tea ritual or the Japanese garden as key works of art to investigate the potentials for *ontological* identification with Nature. Both the tea ritual and the garden function as sensory forms of contemplation that seek to cultivate within the viewer/participant a specialized form of awareness characterized by harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility. Students could be encouraged to create their own unique ceremony, performance, or even garden that could facilitate similar states of mind. Additionally, students could be presented with resources from other fields such as literature, music, and philosophy. In this regard, students might be presented with literature associated with American Transcendentalism, the Hudson River School painters and poets, and investigate the philosophical traditions associated with Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, or Christian Monasticism.

*Cosmologically* based identification refers to experiences of commonality with existence that are brought about through the deep-

seated realization that all entities are aspects of a single unfolding reality (Fox, 1990). This realization can be promoted in the art classroom by the study of works of art pertaining to cosmology, or comprehensive accounts of how reality is in the process of holistic unfoldment. In this regard, works of art related to mythological, religious, speculative philosophical or scientific cosmologies can be incorporated by the art instructor into D.B.A.E. learning experiences in order to promote *cosmological* identification experiences.

For example, key works of art might include a sculptural work from India titled *Shiva, As Lord of the Dance*. Considered the quintessential image of Hindu art and culture, this work depicts the god Shiva dancing within a circle of flames representing the five cosmic acts of creation: creation, preservation, destruction, the unveiling of illusion, and the liberation of the soul (Brown, 1996).

Utilizing more contemporary cosmological imagery art educators might choose to present students with examples of *fractal geometry* derived from the work of the French mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot. Fractal images graphically express the holistic development of natural and mathematical forms and are characterized by repeating patterns where the parts of the patterns at any scale are similar to the shape of the whole (Capra, 1996). Many leading scientists now believe that Nature actually unfolds and manifests according to the mathematical principles of the fractal progression. Thus fractal images graphically communicate the cosmological perspective espoused by the most recent scientific and mathematical theories of Nature.

The issue in utilizing such works of art as the *Shiva, As Lord of the Dance* and fractal geometry in the art classroom is not to promote the belief in any particular cosmological position, but to simply provide students with cosmological perspectives that encourage an understanding of humanities connection to the holistic unfoldment of reality, regardless of what imagery or verbal terminology is used to convey the message.

Thus, after having defined transpersonal *ecological consciousness* as the "sense of self" art educators should promote through teaching and curriculum design, and presenting practices that can facilitate

the shift from the alienated to the related “sense of self,” it is now important to consider how this form of art education can help aid our future survival. Therefore, let us now turn to the concept of “vision” in the field of art education.

### Vision in Art Education

Broadly understood, art education is a field devoted to developing the sense of “vision.” “Vision” generally refers to the faculty of seeing. In art education we seek to cultivate this faculty in terms of comprehending, appreciating, and producing the visual world. I believe we are at a point in the development of civilization where we must conceive of “vision” in a more inclusive manner. As art educators we must work to cultivate the ability to see, but to see with foresight. At the brink of global environmental disaster it is imperative that we recognize our circumstances and envision a direction that can lead us to a successful solution. Art education aimed toward fostering and promoting *ecological consciousness* can assist in this endeavor and help aid our future survival.

Metaphorically, academic art education has been concerned with map making. Map making in the sense that it has sought to provide us with a means of making visual sense of reality. The goal has been to assist students to intelligently, sensitively, and creatively journey through the world. Some of the maps that art educators have provided have been the creativity map, the play map, the therapy map, the visual literacy map, and the understanding map (Lindstrom, 1994). All these maps in their own way are beneficial and important. However, the times demand not so much a new map, but a means to transcend the maps altogether. Let me explain.

The current map in art education is associated with the “understanding” map as proposed by the philosopher Nelson Goodman. This map suggests that we envision the study of art as a means to make sense of the world and ourselves because humans have an innate curiosity to do so (Lindstrom, 1994). Current reform movements in art education such as *Discipline Based Art Education* that present an interdisciplinary, content centered approach, honor and utilize this map. Such approaches

provide the art educator with a wealth of information and conceptual perspectives to draw upon in the study of art. This is in keeping with a postmodern milieu that recognizes plurality in vision and seeks to promote an inclusive form of understanding. This of course is a very positive perspective and one that I personally support. However, there is a fundamental problem with this position. That is, it is still a map. Thus, as maps go, it only provides us with information. It does not necessarily give us an experience of reality, unless we are enamored with the reality and aesthetics of map making.

Therefore, the “vision” I propose that art educators consider is the possibility of assisting our students in utilizing the maps that we provide them, and inspiring them to transcend them and actualize experience. This means that our students arrive at the point where they not only can read our maps and have an understanding of our information and ideas, but they exhibit the ability to embody these ideas. The educational outcome therefore is to produce a form of embodied wisdom!

In this paper I have been engaged in the academic process of map making. Faced with the possibility of unprecedented global environmental disaster, I have sought to develop a map for art educators that might assist them in addressing the crisis. This map essentially argues for the development of *transpersonal ecological consciousness* and gives strategies that art educators can utilize in the classroom to foster such awareness. I have suggested this map because, along with many others, I believe the development of this form of consciousness will allow us to see our environmental problems more clearly, and therefore arrive at consensual democratic agreement as to how to proceed, and further how to act.

What is essential in this endeavor is that we recognize that making such a map, and presenting it in the classroom is not the goal! Why? Because, in our “information age” we have become accustomed to believing two things. One is that information is reality. Two, that more information, faster information, more entertaining information, and more inclusive information is better. However, information is just one aspect of reality that simply describes a more fundamental reality. Also, more, better, and faster information is not necessarily going to enable

our students to transcend our maps, embody wisdom, and meet the challenges of the future. What this means for art educators is that we are faced not with producing more “knowledge” of art, but with promoting and fostering a healthy culture—one that can attain peace and harmony within the natural and social worlds. Knowledge of *transpersonal ecological consciousness* is not synonymous with realizing and living *transpersonal ecological consciousness*. Therefore if our map is to be useful, we must recognize it as a means to an end, not an end in itself.

The way to achieve this objective is to focus upon reality, rather than upon virtual reality. Additionally, we should strive to integrate the “I,” “We,” and “It” categories of experience and attain a true integrated synthesis. In this way we can nurture a more healthy, compassionate, loving, caring, and related culture—one that is meaningfully connected to the natural world and ourselves. As art educators we can invite our students to partake of a journey of self-realization. We can provide them with the best maps possible and encourage them to actualize higher states of consciousness and embody wisdom.

Currently the global environmental crisis calls for immediate action. Issues of environmental degradation and resource depletion, associated with problems related to population, food, energy, pollution, extinction of species, and war, seriously threaten our survival and the survival of other living entities that comprise the living community of the earth (Reuther, 1992). Given the present circumstances, we are largely dependent upon our governments to initiate prompt and significant response. In this regard, art education within an ecological perspective cannot immediately save the world, nor alone ensure our future survival. However, it can become part of the solution.

To do this art education must recover a sense of “vision” and provide direction to the study of art that includes our desires for understanding and also the power to transcend them. This means, promoting a form of genuine embodied wisdom that can vitalize the information of art into a living meaningful and sustainable culture. Art education directed toward the development and realization of *transpersonal ecological consciousness* can assist in this endeavor.

## WORKS CITED

- Brown, J. C. *Rings: Five Passions in the World of Art*. New York: Abrams/High Museum of Art, 1996.
- Capra, F. *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems*. New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1996.
- Fox, W. *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism*. Boston/London: Shambhala, 1990.
- Lindstrom, L. *Art Education for Understanding: Goodman, Arts Propel, and DBAE*. *Journal of Art and Design Education* 13.2 (1994): 189-201.
- Matilsky, B. C. *Fragile Ecologies: Contemporary Artists' Interpretations and Solutions*. New York: Rizzoli/Queens Museum of Art, 1992.
- Naess, A. *Self-realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World*. The Fourth Roby Memorial Lecture in Community Science. Western Australia: Murdoch U, 1986. 39-40.
- Ruther, R. R. *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992.
- Wilber, K. *A Brief History of Everything*. Boston/London: Shambhala, 1996.

