Abstract

The study endeavors to clarify the criteria for the City of Helsinki’s selecting of public art and placing of it in municipal elementary schools. The two research questions are as follows: Are art education perspectives apparent in the City of Helsinki’s art acquisition? And, what is the relationship between art pedagogy and the municipal acquisition of art? The study aims to describe, explain and interpret the desired functions of public art in the school environment as expressed in public policy, as well as to examine how these have changed over time. It also describes what the students and teachers have found to be significant in school-bound public art. Several employees of the Helsinki City Art Museum who have been in charge of art acquisitions were interviewed, and the meaning structures of the theme interviews were analyzed. Content analysis connected with institutional art theory was used, when analyzing the related text material. The study showed that the democratic idea of the right of every person to experience art constitutes the main criteria of producing art for the school environment; by placing works of art in public places the Helsinki City Art Museum is bringing the visual arts into students’ everyday lives. The study also found that the City’s economy as well as its municipal governing bodies influences the criteria. The study argues that through public art thoughtfully embedded in the school environment anyone can learn about visual art, design, and esthetic value. However, students’ possible learning from and about visual art and aesthetics in the school setting is enhanced when they themselves take part in pedagogical activities involving public art in schools and when the students are involved in the process of art acquisition, including the art-pedagogical aspects.
1. Introduction

In addition to outdoor sculptures, public art is featured in public buildings in the City of Helsinki (Helsinki Art Museum. Collections. Public Art). Beginning in the early 1990s, the percentage financing principle has been observed in Helsinki, and since then the city has placed 44 works of art in elementary schools and 21 in day-care centers. 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 is involved in the percentage funding of art projects. Additionally, the Museum commissions an average of three new public artworks each year. These are added to the Museum’s large collection of more than 8700 works, and some are placed in schools and day-care centers among other places.

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 given the status of a work of art 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). In this context, it can be questioned whether the City has followed a certain kind of policy in placing public artworks in schools and day-care centers, in particular.

The present article, which supports my doctoral dissertation in education for the Research Centre for Education, Cultures and the Arts at the University of Helsinki, attempts to answer whether art education perspectives are apparent in the City of Helsinki’s art acquisition. In my view the problem can be solved by clarifying school representatives’- i.e. teachers’ and students’ - influence on the city’s art acquisition. The article presents an analysis and conclusions based on the initial theme interviews conducted at the Helsinki Art Museum.

2. Research Problem

The Helsinki Art Museum claims that an important aspect in selecting locations for art is that of art education (Helsinki Art Museum. Collections. Public Art). For example, most of the percentage financed art is, for this purpose, placed in day-care centers and elementary schools.
In brief, the first level of investigation deals with the placement of public art for the educational environment, which elementary schools strongly represent. The second, forthcoming level presents an analysis of the values and meanings that students and teachers give to the art placed in their schools. The third level of investigation concerns how the school communities are inspired by the works of art in their premises.

In the first stage of the research I interviewed personnel at the Helsinki Art Museum about collection operations and the program of museum education (at the Helsinki Art Museum the concept of museum education refers to audience development, art education and museum pedagogy) in relation to the public art of the city and art projects that have been carried out for elementary schools. I also examined the museum’s Collection Policy Program 2012.

At a later stage I will collect research material from elementary schools and present views and values of the pupils and teachers concerning public art as well as the percentage financed works of art in specific Helsinki area schools. After having obtained the research results I will ponder more deeply the concept of school-bound public art or school-specific public art as well as planning works of art for the school environment.

3. Research Questions

The two research questions are as follows. 1) Are art education perspectives apparent in the City of Helsinki’s art acquisition? 2) What is the relationship between art pedagogy and the municipal acquisition of art? To answer these questions I define in the PhD study how art education is conceptualized at the Helsinki Art Museum.

4. Purpose of the Study

In order to clarify the grounds for the acquisition and placing of public art in elementary schools the study aims to describe, explain and interpret the functions of public art in the school environment as expressed in public policy as well as examining how these functions have changed over time. It also describes what the students and teachers have found to be significant in school-bound public art.

As has been stated, works of art placed in children's and adolescents’ play/recreation and study environments strengthen the self-esteem of both children and adolescents. Urban parks and squares already feature many sculptures. In the light of this, the study responds to the question of
whether cities should invest more in placing art in schools and should the art be permanent or temporary.

5. Research Methods

I theme interviewed three officials from the Helsinki City Art Museum together at the museum: Head of Education Taru Toppola and Curator of Education Lotta Kjellberg who have been in charge of the museum’s educational activities and Collection Assistant Satu Oksanen, who has been involved in art acquisitions. I investigated the latest Collection Policy Program (2012), as well as public art acquisitions and projects carried out with school classes. In addition, I analyzed the meaning structures of the theme interviews and used institutional art theory-connected content analysis when analyzing the related text material.

I measured the significance of the art education perspectives in the acquisition and decision-making by clarifying mainly how schools themselves influence the processes of public art acquisition. In other words, I responded to the question of who are the most important actors in this domain.

6. Findings

The study clarified the criteria for the placement of public art in elementary schools by the City of Helsinki. On the basis of the analysis of the interviews and of the Collection Policy Program it found that the objective is to have significant contemporary works of art on display for the widest possible audience. Several references to art education emerged in the content analysis of museum’s Collection Policy Program 2012.

Even though the given educational perspective has not been recorded up to the Collection Policy Program 2012 nor conducted by the museum personnel, educational standpoints become apparent though; at the moment teachers’ opinions are heard during the City of Helsinki’s acquisition process of percentage funding art projects. Interestingly, the teachers are listened to, but students are not heard during the process. So far, students have been replaced in the decision-making by the teachers. As users of the building the teachers are invited to the meetings where the art acquisition process is planned. Other decision-makers are the municipal commissioner of project (i.e. Real Estate Office), the architect of the location and staff from the museum.
The Helsinki Art Museum suggests about three proposals from artists to the representatives of the schools being often teachers. After choosing the artist, the artist him/herself might have more detailed discussions with the representatives of the schools about the art to be created for the location. Sometimes the curriculum of a school is taken into consideration in the process. It is noteworthy that the Helsinki Art Museum attempts to guarantee the freedom of the artist. As the Curator of Museum Education explained: “The Art Museum does not dictate to the artist to do something already defined. Artists have the freedom to do their own work.” (Interview, Kjellberg).

When a project carried out solely by the Helsinki Art Museum is in question there is no straightforward operations model. The museum functions more autonomously, but on the other hand it can listen to and contemplate more the public. The Curator of Museum Education might decide herself where an art education project in connection with public art takes place. For example, one prospective project of the museum is a pedagogical conservation project, in which a school class participates in the restoration of a battered mural on a school wall. The Helsinki Art Museum hopes that the “pupils’ relationship with the artworks would be respectful, valuable and important” (Interview, Kjellberg). In one of the museum’s projects people were given digital cameras and were assigned with tasks in connection with public art in their neighborhood. Therefore sometimes the public art projects are featured better through social perspectives than pedagogical ones.

7. Conclusions
The study found that through art thoughtfully embedded in the school environment anyone can learn about and from the visual arts, as well as design and esthetic value. Students’ possible learning from and about the visual arts and esthetics in school settings is strengthened when they themselves take part in activities involving public art in schools. A further research topic could be what surplus value might public art bring to the elementary school as learning environment, and possibly to basic education: how can pedagogy be developed through art? Further research could also clarify how, in terms of meaning and activity, publicly-driven works of art in schools differ from those outside the school environment, for example individually oriented, expressive, and spontaneous art in public space, such as graffiti.
References


Interviews