***Voicing a sustainable future through Virtual Arts Education: Culture in action***

# “*Through art alone are we able to emerge from ourselves, to know what another person sees of a universe which is not the same as our own and of which, without art, the landscapes would remain as unknown to us as those that may exist on the moon. Thanks to art, instead of seeing one world only, our own, we see that world multiply itself and we have at our disposal as many worlds as there are original artists, worlds more different one from the other than those which revolve in infinite space, worlds which, centuries after the extinction of the fire from which their light first emanated, whether it is called Rembrandt or Vermeer, send us still each one its special radiance*.”

― Marcel Proust, [In Search of Lost Time, Vol 6: Time Regained and A Guide to Proust](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/849134)

**Ι. A snapshot into Visual Arts Education today**

Rapid social changes in recent years have fundamentally changed traditional perceptions in the field of education paving the way for an ongoing dialogue over how to evolve existing curricula, among many other matters. However stereotypically driven social perceptions continue to focus on the type of skills a child must acquire and cultivate to secure a successful career. Consequently, students enter the school system with often preconceived and restrictive views. This is then further reflected in students’ predefined involvement in the visual arts, as mandated by the formal curriculum, and even exacerbated by doubts frequently voiced by the family environment that tends to view Visual Art Education (VAE) as a waste of time, especially for children. This perception, held by the adult society, is analogous to the forced domestication of the baby elephant[[1]](#footnote-1), because similarly, it stifles the creative expression and freedom of choice of children who, from the first day they enter formal education, are trapped in its strictly defined and rigid structure. Considering the much-needed reform, the European CARE project[[2]](#footnote-2) triggered a systematic investigation into the curricula of its member countries and equally performed field research on the premises of the schools themselves. CARE showed that structural problems in schools are made worse when reducing the hours dedicated to the arts, or lacking art infrastructure, where a single one-sided approach to education is the only route to prepare students for admission to a university, or to find work to earn a living, disregarding the significant contribution of the visual arts in everyday life. Evidence of this deeply rooted social and cultural global crisis lies in the fact that despite sweeping through the 21st century with unprecedented technological developments and at dizzying speed, we nevertheless carry on advocating for the arts and their educational value. Currently, existing educational models limit artistic creative expression to the “use” of visual arts for aesthetic purposes. Further, this restrictive purpose is incompatible with society’s supposed intention of wanting to create a more sustainable future, build on its cultural continuity and educate its younger generations to draw connections between knowledge, culture, and everyday life dilemmas – all within a context of holistically cultivating the mind.

The visual arts are merely one method through which people open their minds to thought and debate, introduce questions and query life, purpose, and society. In practical terms, art classes, or better known as the visual arts in western education systems, may be one of the last catalysts to enable human beings to pull open the decompression valve of the social pressure cooker that today more than ever hides civil unrest.

Works of art often remain “mute and distant” in school life and merely adorn the covers and inside pages of textbooks, while subconsciously print themselves in the archive of images and memories of students who are often unable to willingly retrieve them, resorting to other facts or experiences, and failing to resourcefully apply them in their daily lives in ways they see fit. The purpose of integrating the visual arts across all school facets presents an alternative opportunity for students to develop their creative self-expression and grants an aesthetic upgrade to the school space to put on more attractive school events. As such, any such recorded attempts at creating interdisciplinary connections (i.e., through courses such as literature or history), are due to the personal initiatives of the educational community, instead of formal curriculum guidelines – and serve as one-off attempts and, incidentally, generate largely inert results. (ΜΙ Gutenberg citation). Visual Art Education’s role is to critically convey culture by going beyond the familiar optical visions that render the arts a useful “toolkit” to achieve learning goals in education. A more meaningful and systematic interdisciplinary appreciation and approach to the Visual Arts in school curricula is required, but more so is their integration in a holistic education towards sustainability. At this crucial time in the evolution of societies, arts continue to embody, in fact, enhance culture. Artistic creativity, a fundamental cultural principle, can become a pivotal bridging element between Visual Arts Education (VAE) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), in the effort to transform schools into agents of sustainability (Humphries & Pelletier, 2018: 431-462). The objective of the modern school could be to introduce students to the dynamic and systematic interweaving of all cognitive objects with works of art and cultural assets that are applicable to their daily life. To understand that works of arts do not simply “adorn” museum displays, but connect us eternally to human thought and creation, present endless sources of inspiration, reflection and reconstruction and are compatible with a sustainable future.

Furthermore, visual arts exemplify the variety of creative expression from one culture to another. This continuity benefits conservation and maintenance and gives way to a course of renewal - and one that is sustainable.

**II. Breaking down walls, building bridges: VAE in collaboration with ESD**

The relationship between sustainability and art goes back several centuries. The focus would either be the content or technique, or even the rational use of materials. Similarly, cultural diversity has always been manifested through different languages, human values, social habits, and practices, and is valuable to current and future generations because it creates direct and integral links with biological diversity. (Higgins, 2013). Contemporary artistic practices tend to focus more explicitly on current issues, brought to light due to the pandemic, which clearly tie into with UNESCO’s sustainable development goals, also a reference point for the works of artists on an international scale. Moreover, The Seoul Agenda[[3]](#footnote-3) is the crucial 21st century text on the development of Arts Education, where environmental interest and concerns play a key role. The Seoul Agenda reassesses and aims to set aside past dominant positions such as “art for art's sake” to instrumentalise art in the name of an interdisciplinary education (Siegesmund, 1998, σ. 203) thereby promoting within VAE (Visual Art Education) the idea of ​​active participation in a process of social, environmental, economic and cultural shift, which is necessary for ensuring a sustainable now and future. (ΙΟ2, σ.)

The relationship between the concept of sustainability and the visual arts is multidimensional however the objectives of both are harmoniously integrated, interacting and complementing each other directly or indirectly in both formal and non-formal education (e.g., in museums and cultural spaces), therefore establishing a wider network of interactive relationships and reactions.

Furthermore, the visual arts are a universal language, an expression of cultures and peoples throughout the world, that bares the ability to unite all people. It provides concrete opportunities to both generalists and art teachers, dedicated to an equitable education, to change students’ perceptions and to motivate them in transforming their ideas creatively under the main actions of ESD. Responding to the basic principles of sustainability, all children, regardless of age, race, sex, economic or social status, should have complete access to cultural facilities and activities and be offered the opportunity to develop appropriate skills. By engaging in the visual arts, children that are non-native speakers, children with learning difficulties or with disabilities, children-refugees or in general children with special needs, can participate in and greatly contribute to their school and local communities, help extinguish old social stereotypes, and create a global culture truly representative of all people. [Goldberg, M. (20175). Arts Integration. Routledge, p.29]

The visual arts in their strictly disciplined form enable search and expression helping young people to properly manage their personal feelings and ideas and express them appropriately through a school context. They also help to explore connections among values ​and redefine them through the social changes that a young person experiences and voices, as well as understand cultural changes and differences. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) discretely embraces the visual arts thanks to the young person’s involvement in positive hands-on practice, observation, analysis, and evaluation. Artistic creations as such are an integral part of social tradition and an element that children need to experience to understand it. In this framework, students are live interacting agents in their school environment and the contemporary creators that strengthen the educational process, as they provide a “direct example” of bridging the values ​​and common goals of VAE and ESD, all the while being inspired and challenged. As early as 1969, in the *Archeology of Knowledge* M. Foucault referred to the multidimensional role of the artist, whom he distinguishes as not only an important creator or as an assistant-interpreter of works, but also as a carrier of practices of a time that conflicts or parsimoniously speaks with the status quo of the then truth.

Through VAE, teachers can develop the visual literacy of students, build their critical evaluation skills using the thousands of images and messages communicated to children daily, which are in turn explicitly or implicitly connected with the goals of sustainability, sometimes serving to empower, and other times to undermine them.

In today’s world where globalization has resulted in cultural homogenization and as such a reductionist way of thinking, the need to protect cultural heritage is considered imperative to preserve cultural diversity. When bridged with biology, the cultural mosaic becomes a key stakeholder in sustainable development. (Hoffman, 2006). Cultural resources such as history, customs, and artistic creations, in addition to the visual arts are associated with the preservation of local tradition, identity and the uniqueness of each people and place. Often, for the sake of economic development and technological advancement, the role of the visual arts takes the rear seat and local traditions, and cultural diversity are sacrificed. To avoid this slippery downward slope, targeted partnerships between fine arts education and sustainability education can practically and emphatically highlight the uniqueness of each culture. (Duxbury, Gillette, and Pepper, 2007). Joint actions embedded in a school’s everyday life can help students understand their cultural identity and encourage them to act by helping to preserve cultural diversity and values, promote local traditions, as well as steer clear from the idea of a dominant culture. After all, recognizing the principle of harmonious coexistence for a sustainable future is vital to promote the peaceful coexistence of culturally pluralistic societies. (Nurse, 2006) Transferring a system rich in cultural references to future generations offers an individual a sense of historical continuity and security for his or her historical identity, because cultural heritage is a social asset to which everyone has an inalienable right. In addition, a model of active, collaborative learning emerges from merging the two subjects. This model highlights intercultural dialogue as a valuable tool to create sustainable visions, it contributes to the peaceful coexistence of cultural communities inside and outside the school and facilitates the exchange of valuable forms of knowledge and sustainable artistic practices that enhance traditions, the financial strength of communities, acts of solidarity and social justice. (Tilbury & Mulà, 2009:1)

Education through the visual arts offers young people the opportunity to participate in collective activities with the intention of becoming active citizens. Our recent experience from the CARE project demonstrated that when implementing initiatives in schools that promote the visual arts and its cultural, social, environmental, and economic dimensions within a sustainability framework, initial hypotheses are confirmed. Such initiatives leave behind an optimistic legacy and a more sustainable perspective for the future. Guided by creativity and imagination, and by reflective methods such as upgrading symbols and messages, the visual arts have the transformative power to motivate students to actively collaborate and create meaning to their own culture, but equally participate in the culture of others, thereby shifting to the single basic sustainable principle defining culture: We care, we share, we learn together. (See Care IO3 & ΙΟ4; Higgins, 2013:23-24; Tilbury, 2011)

Hence, dynamic, and visual interventions are a vehicle for sustainability, and with the contribution of artists, can be an important catalyst to create new collaborations between schools and local communities, and at the same time strengthen intergenerational learning. For example, the conceptual framework of a cultural ecology can form the basis of this cooperation, fueling the need to rethink the role of education, emphasizing the dynamic interaction between continuity and change, conservation and rebirth, all concepts fundamental to Sustainability.

It is also worth mentioning the opposing views that raise doubts around the contribution of the arts to creating a sustainable society. For example, Belfiore and Bennett (2007) argue that, although art may have an educational, cognitive, humanitarian, or other purpose, the value of a work of art is firmly embedded in the aesthetic realm. Similarly, Jelinek (2013) refers to contemporary art when questioning its ability to substantially change the status quo and, as she argues, the art world itself has now succumbed to neoliberal values ​​and orientations. Dunkley (2014).

**Teachers: animators and orchestrators**

To transform learning into an active, engaging, and dynamic environment through the visual arts, Critical Pedagogy places works of art within their context and enables learners, regardless of their young age, to critically comment both on the works themselves and the setting in which they take place. Paulo Freire, in fact, saw the visual arts as a disarming method to achieve a dialectical and liberating education, because they operate in a transformative manner that leads toward a more humane society. (Morris, 1998; Freire, 1973) This approach paves the way to diverse representations of life, therefore providing opportunities for comparison and informed and dynamic intercultural dialogue. Learners not only question the status quo, but also try to understand how it emerged in the first place. They learn to recognize and shape their own identity, which consequently leads to actions. Assessing social and political issues, be it social status, race, gender, diversity, multiculturalism, the commercialization of art or the globalization of culture, or even if evaluating common issues in education and school life, opens the creative door to personal works of art. Critical thinking helps students make connections between art and their own experiences, and they learn to see and think of themselves and society more deeply from a variety of angles and perspectives.

Artistically and culturally illiterate children lead to future citizens with abolished judgment who will find it difficult to question public opinion or pursue their own sustainable future. They won’t be able to connect theoretical school knowledge with the practical issues of everyday life, often failing to build global views and arguments to understand the wider world.

 In this scandalously shaped modern everyday life, the generalist teacher is called on, without having received professional training in the visual arts or on issues of sustainable development, to teach art lessons, and therefore fill the gaps of visual art educators.

Institutions are then obliged to train and educate teachers in these two areas through for their professional development and growth. If the teachers themselves can see extended horizons and willing to experiment with the synergy of the two subjects (VAE & ESD) then they’ll be able to introduce radical changes in the daily experiences of their classrooms and to the broader culture of their students to encourage consistent engagement. Interdisciplinary exposure brings visual education, the appreciation for cultural assets, and all forms of art, jointly or separately, both in the curriculum and daily life, and all grey zones in between.

Discussing changes in social manners through VAE and reacting to several life issues is a matter of creative processes, a form of art. When such experience occurs, satisfaction runs deep between students, thus increasing the likelihood of obtaining a holistic, valuable education. This concept of what is educationally valuable is foreign to current western pedagogical practices that attempt to quickly stimulate and motivate students using reward systems that have no intrinsic connection with everyday life issues, their culture or with the work they are asked to do.

Motivating teachers to draw connections between the two subjects in school life, as the current CARE project has demonstrated, remains a personal will instead of an official state policy or concern. Research, relevant certified training accessible to all, informed educational institutions and school counselors, partnerships with research centers and universities, establishing a network of intergenerational learning support are much sought after, however still in the early stages in several countries, while the list of VAE and ESD shortcomings in formal education remains long. Teachers who have received basic training, such as the initial participants in the CARE project, are already connecting dots, asking deeper questions and engaging their students in dynamic discussions, motivating them to reflect and re-create.

In addition, continuous training and the active participation of a Professional Educational Community bridges the principles of ESD and VAE on a cognitive and practical level for both general teachers and art teachers, generating above and beyond the expected results. This Community serves as the “right example” to students and models the value of creating communities with sustainable goals, to show solidarity and continuously add experiences, knowledge, the exchanges of opinions and good practices.

**Experimenting with a new approach**

Co-creating change is at the heart of innovative, holistic education. Teachers ensuring current and everyday applicable knowledge and skills, is the driving force behind constructive changes in bridging ESD with VAE.

When visual arts are held in the hands of a trained and creative teacher who does not aim to respond to an interdisciplinary issue as a one-off problem but aims instead to connect the pillars of sustainability and UNESCO’s 17 sustainable development goals systematically and daily with students’ intellectual growth and daily lives, it’s fair to say that visual arts become a “driver” for change, instead of just a “vehicle”.

Students should be introduced to problem-based learning, to discuss ideas of sustainability and to explore them ulitising multiple perspectives drawn from the vast examples of world art history and museums artefacts.

Through group project work, various interdisciplinary approaches and diverse conceptual frameworks are used to enhance students’ understanding and to motivate them to explore the links between environmental issues, poverty, consumption, population, economic globalization.

# Let's look at an example. One sustainable function of the visual arts is the ability to allow us to participate empathetically in the lives of others. Through artworks and artistic practices, artists make it easier for students to put themselves in the shoes of others and thus understand a world that would otherwise be unknown to them. For example, a statistical description of the frequency of destruction of children's recreational areas in a densely populated urban centre may provide useful statistical information, but it hardly provides an empathic understanding of the conditions under which children live and how their lives have changed, which can be easily made evident through artistic creations. Consider the potential of such sources in the teaching of history or even more broadly in social studies. In the context of the CARE project, a systematic attempt was made in the partner schools in Greece to present artworks across time to recognise the concepts of migration and refugeeism. Thus, the small statuette of the *Refugee child* (150 AD, National Archaeological Museum, Athens), *The Wreck of the Medusa* by Théodore Géricault (1818-19, Musée du Louvre, Paris), *The Elegy of the Oceans* by Yannis Psychopedis (2020), Jason deCaires Taylor's underwater sculpture *Raft of Lampedusa* (2016, courtesy of the artist), Vik Muniz's "paper" Lampedusa (2015) at the 56th Venice Biennale, Kalliopi Lemos's Pledges For a Safe Passage, (2012) at the 3rd Çanakkale Biennial, a wooden boat covered with original votives and votives from tin obtained from soft drink cans carrying the names of illegal immigrants, and Alina Gavrielatos' baby shirts with the names of lost children at the 2nd Çanakkale Biennial (2010) combined with performances and activist presentations by Wei Wei, Angeliki Avigitidou and other international and Greek contemporary artists. At the same time, students' research and artistic reflections led them to search for articles and books with stories of uprooting, as well as to critically evaluate contemporary news as "photographed" in social media. The students involved in that project, with the encouragement of teachers, students’ families, and the local community, had the opportunity to listen to the language and music of migrants and refugees, to read and understand their myths and stories, to taste their food, to read excerpts from literary texts and to "see" their art. The visual arts provided students with a kind of access to the timeline (past, present, future) that textbooks (texts/lectures) usually leave out. The Care project was fundamentally concerned with the potential of visual arts to facilitate students' understanding. This contrasts with the dominant aims of VAE, which tend to focus more on production and performance skills and knowledge of the visual arts than on the quality of the student experience.

VAE, given its broader sustainable view, can engage students with all senses, feelings and ideas and help them to develop their ability to read in between the lines of such experiences. This ought to be the primary concern for teachers, educational policymakers, and curriculum planners.

Expanding further on students’ questions, the final discussion brought to the surface reflections on the essential role of art, the repetitive nature of history that is “taught but not learned” and upgrading - a key feature for works of art. The recent experience from implementing the ideas of the CARE project in the schools, evidenced how almost all students, as well as the teachers involved, came together, were motivated to discover, and gradually acquired the same strong “voices” with artistic substance, all the while adopting the first steps to create joint actions among VAE & ESD both within the school and their local community, e.g., in play areas.

It does not, of course, devalue aesthetic pleasure, or the possibility given to students through an art class to express themselves, or to sit back, or even to scan the images in their school textbooks or those absorbed daily as they stroll the streets of their neighborhoods. More importantly and worth considering is if all the above is essential in the formation of students’ personalities and identities, then how much more significant is it to consistently link daily challenges with the understanding of sustainability goals. If students consciously understand aesthetics as another element, they won’t be able to enjoy, or create “art”, nor will they be concerned about wider issues such as litter and decrepit public spaces, or inappropriate behaviors inside and outside school. Empowering students through the visual arts but within a spirit of sustainable development goals enables them to act. But instead of being in the passenger seat, they hold the steering wheel of a new life, the one they will build as future citizens. The walls and corridors of school buildings are the canvases that spark interest in works of art. Whether such works are created by the students themselves or other artists, they can serve as artistic references on the place children hold in society or on children’s rights, nonetheless, to trigger artistic activism and dialogue with the wider society.

It does not suffice to simply present the skills, talents, and achievements of the visual arts over past centuries. More importantly, visual arts highlight the “social dimensions” of phenomena, the need to participate in public opinion, but also to disseminate ecological and other social messages such as solidarity, the stigmatisation of poor behaviors, breaking taboos, as well as challenge examples of propaganda or unsustainable strategy, together with students being the active subjects in research, critique, and dialogue. As we try to adequately plan lessons around the value of Sustainability through coordinated education and the visual arts, it is imperative to build an awareness among children on the parallel evolution of human beings with artistic creativity throughout history, a fact that is reflected in art works, daily life, and the myths and traditions that were consequently cultivated. The goal is to recognise the absolute need to protect cultural diversity, adopt attitudes of the integration of all as a way of life, and take initiatives to better manage cultural and natural resources, but also human resources: There’s never one too many, and no one is left behind.

Through VAE, teachers can also make use of the underachievement of students, in line with one crucial goal of sustainable development, that of social inclusion. Often students experience a loss of curiosity, a sense of inadequacy in their ability to learn, and a disconnection between the school curriculum and their present and future lives. The effectiveness of integrating the visual arts into the school curriculum and engaging students in artistic activity as creative thinkers in a context based on collaboration and community-based intergenerational learning is a way of making core curriculum more relevant and meaningful to them. Artistic projects capture the imagination and build the confidence of disengaged students creating an enthusiastic atmosphere of active learning among students, teachers, and collaborating artists. However, teachers (generalists and art educators alike), should make sure engagement is transferred beyond the experience that created it and create a change in the attitudes and behaviours of the participants. A successful transformation is recorded when formerly disengaged students now expend effort in learning, persist despite difficulties, find ways to express thoughts and feelings through visual arts, take pride in producing quality artistic and other schoolwork, demonstrate enthusiasm, curiosity, and interest. Thus, students get to see the big picture and understand school life as part of their whole life and knowledge as a holistic, non-ending process.

As a result of the Teacher Training Program and the implementation phase of the program’s objectives in schools, the CARE project proved that the practice of bridging VAE and ESD presented new possibilities to teachers: a renewed commitment to their students’ learning, closer relationships with students, and a new willingness to become co-learners in the classroom. Teacher personal and professional development is enhanced, and creative spirits are renewed through their involvement in the visual arts, despite the practical difficulties and lack of knowledge of the two new subjects (VAE & ESD).

**The role of museums and cultural spaces**

Museums are custodians of cultural wealth and equally, have a significant role to play to accurately complement the multidimensional goals of Education for Sustainable Development and the Visual Arts. Museums and cultural spaces that display art and cultural assets, on the one hand, are places that encourage “informal” improvised creation and participation but on the other, are also excellent targets for education for sustainable development. After all, museums are institutions that were originally founded on the central ideas of sustainability: preservation, conservation but also a renaissance of a world culture in the making.

As such, museums are open “windows to the world” with western and non-western cultures represented, in whole or in part. The future direction of museums is to make clear that there is not one “dominant” art or culture but that there are many artistic, historical, and cultural narratives. These narratives reflect the differences, as well as the similarities between cultures, and emphasise the complexity of the visual arts by taking Western readers far afield of their comfort zone, of their accustomed territory, exposing them to unfamiliar but very intriguing and interesting ways of thinking (e.g., open-minded, inclusive, and sustainable) about our planet and our living “together”.

It is essential to understand that a museum’s functions can adopt a social focus and offer the potential to transform the modes of thinking and perceptions of contemporary societies. Museums help inspire and facilitate a global conversation on promoting peace, reconciliation, civic pluralism, and democratic citizenship.

"Cultural organisations can be instrumental in the areas of both practice and policy to support the arts programmes in their local schools. They can have a consistent presence in the advocacy, and partner with schools to provide additional resources" (Humphries & Pelletier, 2018: 459). Museum objects and artworks have the unique potential to address inequalities, injustice, and environmental challenges, enhancing respect and interest in human values and cultural polymorphism inside and outside the school environment. By targeting the core values and practices of art museums, we will examine ways to leverage their power to assist in shaping a sustainable future for all cultures (Janes & Sandell, 2019) and secure societies’ wellbeing, by actively and invariably engaging visual art educators and children. "Museums are in a position to invent a new future for themselves and their communities" (Janes, 2013: 13) and "make room for a commitment to the durability and wellbeing of individuals, communities and the natural world" (Berry, 2000: 134).

More than ever, social inclusion, as it’s understood today, becomes more universal and meaningful within cultural organisations and museums. It genuinely engages representatives from the western and non-western hemisphere with equal representation in language, and participation in key decisions. Respectively, in museums the “ruling” cultures must give space, even if through temporary exhibitions or thematic references to the culture of minorities that settle in their host country and are often requested to blend into a new context without voice or identity. Integrating into the dominant culture under the auspices of a societal sustainable development discourages the silencing or alienation of the other cultural identity. On the contrary, a sustainable, “enlightened” society offers space, a voice to everyone and takes care of those who lost their livelihood and cultural welfare to help them find a way to present and revive their customs and traditions, promote their culture, discover the common threads that tie communities together to lead lives that are "fair", equal and civilized. A people that loses its culture and is not represented can’t help but become an amorphous mass that can burst the hard-earned global cultural fabric. Museums and the visual arts have a leading role to play in this campaign.

To this end, and in collaboration with schools that converge VAE and ESD influences with local communities, in practical terms, museums can coordinate exhibitions displaying the diverse cultures of students thus encouraging the creation of smaller museums of the “world” within the schools themselves. In addition, museums can take one step further and include young people not just as visitors, but as active participants in the creation, preservation and promotion of culture and strengthen the meaning of a cultural asset by adding objects, stories, or enriching the existing traditions of their places. When you are “given value and importance”, you consolidate this feeling within the soul, and thus becomes a conscious way of life that guarantees the sustainable future of societies and cultures.

The purpose of museums and the visual arts is not simply to transfer cultural heritage into schools. Cultural heritage is not a world-renowned archive of sacred treasures. What is crucial is for educators and learners to understand cultural diversity and to encounter the perceptions and institutions of different cultures. By emphasising cultural relativity, educators and learners are encouraged to compare their own cultural assumptions with those of other cultures. They can then focus on the evolutionary nature of culture and the potential for change, understand the value of cultural perspectives and draw connections between modern age values ​and the historical forces that shaped them.

Seeing that we are nurturing the first generation of “digital natives”, children as comfortable navigating the online realm as the streets of their neighborhood (Merritt 2012: 99), museums could use social media and other technological tools available in the museum itself or through its website, to challenge this generation to seek its cultural identity, their artistic nature and other hobbies, to sensitise them to daily challenges and acknowledge the existence of non-sustainable goals. This could be the beginning of a tricky relationship but one that would gain status with time and take on a newer, more attractive, and sustainable image.

**Concluding remarks**

Today, visual arts can radically contribute to upgrading the social standard of living. Seeing that the language of art is universal, it has a strong activist presence, and its imaginative, dynamic symbolism communicates directly to the souls of both young and old all over the world. Perhaps the future request for a sustainable development will not ever question the need to strengthen the aesthetic education of citizens, both at a conscious and practical level. Aesthetic education is a universal “ecological” belief because it reinforces mutual understanding, world peace and reduces human misery for all peoples of the earth by removing the boundaries between developed and underdeveloped countries, the strong vs the weak, the favored vs the non-favored.

Educational systems are increasingly concerned about the consequences of rapidly increasing and significant divides between wealthy and average citizens. The visual arts should in no way be considered a luxury or superficial consumable, in other words, something that only people with a higher level of education or people of a certain financial status can access. It’s precisely the opposite. The visual arts are for people who see emotion and exuberance through the “beautiful”, a mirror to our society. They decompress, soothe, sensitise and teach people to better understand all that surrounds them. Through art, human beings can get to know themselves better, discover their faults, possibilities, limitations, and havens. Individuals learn to see through a different lens, understand problems, and look for solutions through the meekness and serenity that a work of art so often disseminates. The arts, and especially the visual arts are created through the lives, experiences, and ideas of humanity, they merge the individual with a greater whole and socialise the latter in solidarity with others, nature, and culture.

The visual arts need to find a steady pace in the lives of younger generations and their highly uncertain future. Teachers, both generalists and art specialists, through creative and consistent collaboration, can encourage the enthusiasm, expression, and critical thought of children, who instead of being seen as future citizens, should be treated as “present participants” in the social and cultural making. Rapid social and economic changes, as well as the recent experiences gained from the COVID-19 pandemic, have dramatically contributed to the need to consolidate this highly efficient and intuitive bridge between the visual arts, cultural assets, and the principles of sustainable development in education, seeing that the negative consequences of technological development, daily acts of cruelty, violence and isolation have led to lonely societies with lonely people. 2020 marked the 15th consecutive year of a decline in civil rights and freedoms worldwide. If this trend continues, it risks destabilising the democratic foundations of the world. Maintaining democratic vigor and multicultural respect in a highly multidimensional, and rapidly shifting world depends to a large extent on educating and empowering people, both young and old, theoretically, and practically, to adapt to new conditions and to remain resilient to exogenous challenges. The politics of the future depends on a Civilization that can guarantee a peaceful new world, by projecting the goals of sustainability in everyday life and in educational practice through the visual arts.

1. The newborn elephant is tied to a tree with a strong rope, which it is unable to uproot the tree initially. Later, when the elephant is fully grown, he stops thinking about freedom and it will live in captivity forever. In other words, what holds the elephant back is not the rope, but the habit. Something similar happens to people, whose decisions and actions are often part of "automatic behaviors" that stem from habits and depend on the context. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *CARE, Visual art education in new times: Connecting Art with REal life issues* is an EU-funded, Erasmus + ΚΑ203 project (2019-2022)*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.unitwin-arts.phil.fau.de/files/2017/08/Seoul_Agenda_EN.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)