***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 view of 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 a variety of issues, including how to modify existing curricula. However, even within this discussion, 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 a school system often rife with restrictive preconceptions about what needs to be taught. These views are then reflected in students’ relatively limited exposure to the visual arts, as mandated by the formal curriculum. This approach is even reinforced by doubts raised from families that frequently tend to view Visual Art Education (VAE) as a waste of time, especially for children. This perception by adults can be likened to the forced domestication of the baby elephant;[[1]](#footnote-1) limited exposure to VAE, like taming a wild creature, stifles the creative expression and freedom of choice of children who, from the first day they enter formal education, are trapped in a strictly defined and rigid structure. Considering the curricula’s much-needed reform, the European CARE[[2]](#footnote-2) project triggered a systematic investigation into the curricula of its member countries and performed field research on the premises of the schools themselves. CARE showed that structural problems in schools are made worse when the hours dedicated to the arts are reduced or an art infrastructure is lacking; in essence, where a single, one-sided approach to education focuses only on preparing students for admission to a university, or for finding a way to earn a living, disregarding the significant contribution of the visual arts to everyday life. Evidence of this deep social and cultural global crisis is that even as unprecedented technological developments sweep through the 21st century at a dizzying pace, there are continued efforts desperately 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. However, this limited purpose is incompatible with society’s purported intention of seeking to create a more sustainable future, build on its cultural continuity, and educate its younger generations to be able to make connections between knowledge, culture, and quotidian life dilemmas, all within a context of holistically cultivating the mind.

The visual arts represent merely one avenue through which people open their minds to thought and debate and face new dilemmas and issues about life, society, social roles and purposes, and more. In practical terms, art classes, better known as the visual arts in western education systems, may be one of the hopes for individuals to release the decompression valve of the social pressure cooker that today, more than ever, conceals civil unrest.

Works of art often remain “mute and distant” in school life, merely adorning the covers and inner pages of textbooks, while subconsciously imprinting themselves in the students’ archives of images and memories. Students are then often unable to retrieve these images at will or connect them with other knowledge or experiences that would enable them to apply them resourcefully in their daily lives. Better integrating the visual arts across facets of the school experiences not only offers an alternative means for students to develop their creative self-expression, but also enhances the aesthetic level of the school space and enables the school to create more attractive school events. Nevertheless, evidence of attempts to develop interdisciplinary connections (i.e., within courses such as literature or history), indicate that these arise from personal initiatives in the educational community, rather than as a result of formal curriculum guidelines, and are usually isolated and ultimately unfruitful efforts (ΜΙ Gutenberg citation). VAE’s role is to critically convey culture by transcending the familiar optical visions that render the arts a useful “toolkit” for attaining learning goals in education. A more meaningful and systematic interdisciplinary appreciation and approach to VAE in school curricula is certainly required. Even more important is the integration of these studies within a holistic education advancing sustainability. At this crucial time in the evolution of societies, arts continue to embody, and, in fact, enhance culture. Artistic creativity, a fundamental cultural principle, can serve as a pivotal bridging element between Visual Arts Education (VAE) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) for the purpose of transforming 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 integration all works of art and cultural assets that are applicable to their daily lives into all cognitive subjects. Students needs to be encouraged to understand that works of arts do not simply “adorn” museum displays, but connect us to human thought and creation throughout the generations, present endless sources of inspiration, reflection and reconstruction, and are compatible with a sustainable future.

Furthermore, visual arts exemplify the variety of creative expression among cultures. 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 actually goes back several centuries. The focus in the past would either be the content or technique, or even the thoughtful 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 the most pressing topical issues, such as those that emerged from the risks of the recent pandemic. This is clearly consistent with UNESCO’s sustainable development goals, which are also a reference point for artistic endeavors internationally. Moreover, The Seoul Agenda: Goals for the Development of Arts Education[[3]](#footnote-3) is the crucial 21st century text on the development of an arts education, in which environmental interest and concerns play a key role. The Seoul Agenda reassesses and aims to revise and transcend past dominant positions, such as “art for art's sake,” to instrumentalize art for the purpose of advancing an interdisciplinary education (Siegesmund, 1998, 203) thereby promoting within VAE the idea of ​​active participation in a process of social, environmental, economic, and cultural shift, which is necessary for ensuring a sustainable present and future. (ΙΟ2, σ.)

The relationship between the concept of sustainability and the visual arts is multidimensional and 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), thereby 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, with the potential to unite all people. It provides concrete opportunities to those generalists and art teachers, dedicated to an equitable education, to change students’ perceptions and to motivate them in transforming their ideas creatively within the context of ESD activities. 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 who are non-native speakers, children with learning difficulties or with disabilities, children-refugees, or children with general special needs, can participate in and greatly contribute to their school and local communities, help extinguish outdated social stereotypes, and create a global culture truly representative of all people (Goldberg, 2017,5 29]

The discipline of the visual arts enables young people to delve into their personal feelings and thoughts and find ways to manage and express them appropriately through a school context. The visual arts also help young people explore and redefine connections among values ​in light of the social changes taking place around them, as well as understand cultural changes and differences. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) fluidly and skillfully embraces the visual arts through 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, an element that children need to experience in order to understand it. In this framework, students’ interactions within the school environment with living, contemporary creators energize the educational process, providing a “direct example” of bridging the values and common goals of VAE and ESD, while serving as an inspiration and challenge. As early as 1969, in his book, *The* *Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault referred to the multidimensional role of the artist, whom he identifies as not only an important creator or an interpreter of works, but also as a carrier of practices from a time that conflict or openly question the status quo of what is considered the contemporary truth.

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

In today’s world, where globalization has resulted in cultural homogenization and a resulting reductionist way of thinking, the need to protect cultural heritage is considered imperative to preserve cultural diversity. When linked 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 in general, are associated with the preservation of local tradition, identity, and the uniqueness of each people and place. Often, in the name of economic development and technological advancement, the role of the visual arts is diminished, 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). Multidisciplinary and joint projects embedded in a school’s routine can help students understand their cultural identity, encourage them to act to work preserve cultural diversity and values and promote local traditions, and help them avoid being dominated by any particular cultural constraints. Ultimately, recognizing the principle of harmonious coexistence for a sustainable future is vital for promoting 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 a sense of security about 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 an interdisciplinary approach merging two subjects. This model recognizes the importance of intercultural dialogue as a valuable tool in creating create sustainable visions, 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 and learn to become active citizens. Our recent experience from the CARE project confirms our initial hypotheses 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, such initiatives create an optimistic legacy and a more sustainable perspective for the future. Guided by creativity and imagination, and by reflective methods, such as updating symbols and messages, the visual arts have the transformative power to motivate students to actively collaborate in creating meanings for their own culture as well as participate in the culture of others, thereby shifting to the basic sustainable principle defining culture: We care, we share, we learn together (See Care IO3 & ΙΟ4; Higgins, 2013, 23–24; Tilbury, 2011)

Thus, dynamic visual interventions are a vehicle for sustainability, and with the contribution of artists, can serve as an important catalyst for creating new collaborations between schools and local communities, while at the same time strengthening intergenerational learning. For example, the conceptual framework of cultural ecology can form the basis of such cooperation by stimulating a discussion about the need to rethink the role of education, emphasizing the dynamic interaction between continuity and change, conservation and regeneration, all concepts fundamental to sustainability.

It is also worth mentioning the contrary view that questions 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 arguing that the art world 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, viewed 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 (Freire, 1973; Morris, 1998) This approach facilitates 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 whose judgment has been deprived, eviscerated to an extent, thus impairing their ability to question public opinion or pursue their own sustainable future. They will not be able to connect theoretical academic knowledge with the practical issues of everyday life, often failing to build global views and arguments to understand the wider world.

 Unfortunately – indeed, shamefully, in the modern world, the generalist teacher without having received professional training in the visual arts or on issues of sustainable development, is usually called upon to teach art lessons, filling in the gaps left by the lack of specialized visual art educators.

Institutions have the responsibility of training and educating teachers in these two areas of art and sustainability, thereby enabling them to succeed in their own professional development and growth. If the teachers’ imaginations and visions are extended, and they become willing to experiment with the synergy of the two subjects of VAE and ESD, they will be able to introduce radical changes in the daily experiences of their classrooms and to the broader culture of their students by encouraging them to engage more systematically. An interdisciplinary approach not only encourages visual education and the appreciation visual cultural assets, but also promotes appreciation for all forms of art, jointly or separately, both in the curriculum and in daily life; indeed, in all areas of the lives of young people.

Discussing changes in social norms and reacting to diverse issues in life through VAE activates creative processes – a form of art. When students undergo such experiences, they enjoy deep feelings of satisfaction, increasing the likelihood that they will obtain a holistic, valuable education. This concept of what is educationally valuable is foreign to current western pedagogical practices that seek to quickly stimulate and motivate students using reward systems that have no intrinsic connection with the genuine issues of real life, the students’ culture or the work they will eventually do as adults.

As the current CARE project has demonstrated, motivating teachers to draw connections between the two subjects in school life remains a matter of personal choice rather than 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, and establishment of a network of intergenerational learning support are much needed, but remain in the early stages of development in several countries. Meanwhile, 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 making connections, 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 and art teachers alike, generating results that far exceed what was anticipated. This community serves as the “good example” to students – as models of the value of creating communities with sustainable goals, showing solidarity and continuously adding experiences, knowledge, exchanges of opinions, and positive actions

**Experimenting with a new approach**

Co-creating change is at the heart of innovative, holistic education. Teachers can ensure that students become equipped with current and everyday applicable knowledge and skills, thereby becoming the driving force behind constructive changes in bridging ESD with VAE.

In the hands of a trained and creative educator who aims to respond not merely once or to a limited extent to an interdisciplinary issue, but to systematically and daily connect the pillars of sustainability and the 17 UNESCO goals to the students’ intellectual growth and daily lives, the visual arts can arguably become a “driver” for change, rather than just a “vehicle.”

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

Working through group projects, various interdisciplinary approaches and diverse conceptual frameworks can be drawn upon to enhance students’ understanding and motivate them to explore the links between environmental issues, poverty, consumption, population, and economic globalization.

# Here it is valuable to consider a concrete example. One sustainable function of the visual arts is the ability to enable us to participate empathetically in the lives of others. Through artworks and artistic practices, artists make it easier for students to viscerally recognize the experiences of others and thereby understand a world that would otherwise remain unknown to them. For example, a statistical description of the frequency of destruction of children’s recreational areas in densely populated urban centers may provide useful statistical information, but it hardly evokes a sympathetic understanding of or identification with the conditions under which children live and how their lives have changed, which can easily be brought to life 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 highlight and help the students understand and recognize 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 (1818-1819, 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) exhibited at the 56th Venice Biennale, Kalliopi Lemos's *Pledges For a Safe Passage*, (2012) exhibited 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 exhibited at the 2nd Çanakkale Biennial (2010), were presented to students, together with performances and activist presentations by Wei Wei, Angeliki Avigitidou, and other international and Greek contemporary artists. Along with exposure to these works, the students’ research and the artistic reflections led them to search for articles and books with accounts of uprooting, as well as to critically evaluate contemporary news as “captured” 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, text and lectures usually omit. The CARE project was fundamentally interested in the potential of the 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 sustainability perspective, can engage with all the students’ senses, feelings, and ideas and help them to develop their ability to understand the subtleties and nuances of such experiences of others. This should be a primary goal for teachers, educational policymakers, and curriculum planners.

A key feature of the role of introducing works of art into the curriculum is expanding the scope of students’ questions, bringing to the surface reflections on the essential role of art, the repetitive nature of history that is “taught but not learned,” and of the importance of updating our knowledge. The recent experience from implementing the ideas of the CARE project in the schools demonstrated how almost all the students, as well as the teachers involved, came together, were motivated to discover, and gradually acquired the same strong “voices” with artistic substance, while also taking the first steps to e initiate projects incorporating VAE and ESD both within the school and in their local community, e.g., in play areas.

Applying VAE or ESD does not, of course in any way devalue aesthetic pleasure, or diminish the opportunities students in an art class have to express themselves, or the possibilities students generally have in a general studies class have to sit back and scan the images in their school textbooks, or even the experiences students have to absorb images daily as they stroll the streets of their neighborhoods. More importantly, and worth considering, is that if all the above is indeed essential in the formation of students’ personalities and identities, then how much more significant it becomes to consistently link daily challenges with the understanding of sustainability goals. If students consciously understand that aesthetics has a moral value, they won’t be able to say that they enjoy, or create “art,” but they don’t care 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, not merely as passive participants led by others, but as initiators of a new life 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, and thereby 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, and to disseminate ecological and other social messages, such as solidarity, stigmatizing problematic behaviors, breaking taboos, as well examples of propaganda or unsustainable strategies, together with students becoming 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 cultivated. The ultimate goals should be to recognize the absolute need to protect cultural diversity, adopt attitudes supporting the integration of all as a way of life, and to take initiatives to better manage not only 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 address the underachievement of students, in line with one of sustainable development’s crucial goals – social inclusion. Students often 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 within 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 otherwise disengaged students by creating an enthusiastic atmosphere of active learning among students, teachers, and collaborating artists. However, teachers (generalists and art educators alike), should ensure that engagement extends beyond the immediate experience that generated it and actually leads to a change in the attitudes and behaviors of the participants. A successful transformation is demonstrated when formerly disengaged students actually 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, and exhibit 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. Teachers’ personal and professional development was enhanced, and creativity was renewed through their involvement in the visual arts, despite the practical difficulties and lack of knowledge of the two new subjects (VAE and ESD).

**The role of museums and cultural spaces**

Museums, as custodians of cultural wealth and equally, have a significant role to play in suitably complementing the multidimensional goals of VAE and ESD. Museums and cultural spaces that display art and cultural assets are venues that encourage “informal” improvised creation and participation. They are also ideal places where education for sustainable development can be promoted. In fact, essentially, museums are institutions that were originally founded on the central ideas of sustainability: preservation and 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 emphasize the complexity of the visual arts by taking Western readers far afield from their comfort zones, their accustomed territories, exposing them to unfamiliar but highly 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 incorporate a social focus and offer the potential to transform contemporary societies’ ways of thinking and perceptions. 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 possess 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 focusing on the core values and practices of art museums, we will examine ways to take advantage of their power to assist in shaping a sustainable future for all cultures (Janes & Sandell, 2019) and in securing the wellbeing of societies by actively and consistently 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 before, social inclusion, as it is understood today, must become more universal and meaningful within cultural organizations and museums, truly engaging in multicultural dialogue with representatives from the western and non-western hemisphere, with equal representation in both language and participation in key decisions. In addition, in museums, the “hegemonic” cultures must give space, even if in temporary exhibitions or thematic references, to the cultures of minorities that have settled in their host country and are often expected to blend into a new context without voice or identity. Integrating into the dominant culture according to the principles of 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 helps those who have lost their livelihoods and cultural assets to find a way to present and revive their customs and traditions, promote their culture, and to discover the common threads that tie communities together in order 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 in giving a “voice” or place to all cultures.

To this end, in practical terms, museums, in collaboration with schools that are implementing VAE and ESD within their local communities, can coordinate exhibitions displaying the diverse cultures of students thus encouraging the creation of smaller museums of the “world” within the schools themselves. Museums should also take the additional step of including young people not just as visitors, but as active participants in the creation, preservation, and promotion of culture who can strengthen the meaning of cultural assets by adding objects, stories, or enriching the existing traditions of their places. When you are “given value and importance,” you consolidate this feeling internally, and this recognition 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 merely to transfer cultural heritage into schools. Cultural heritage is not simply a world-renowned archive of sacred treasures. It is crucial for educators and learners to understand cultural diversity and to encounter the perceptions and institutions of different cultures. The emphasis on cultural relativity encourages educators and learners 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 contemporary values ​and the historical forces that shaped them.

Given 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 interests, to sensitize them to daily challenges and helping them recognize the existence of non-sustainable goals. Building such relationships could face resistance in the beginning, but the process could gain viability and status over time, eventually becoming an attractive and welcome option for many.

**Concluding remarks**

Today, visual arts can radically contribute to upgrading the social standard of living. Seeing that the language of art is universal. The language of art, with its universality, its strong activist presence and its imaginative, dynamic symbolism communicates and personally with young and old all over the world. Perhaps future demands for sustainable development will take for granted the need to strengthen the aesthetic education of citizens, at both a conscious and a practical level. Aesthetic education is a universal “ecological” belief, as it reinforces mutual understanding and world peace and reduces human misery for all peoples of the world by abolishing the boundaries between developed and underdeveloped countries, the strong and the weak, the privileged and the non-privileged.

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 commodity, something accessible only to 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 seek to experience emotion and exuberance through the “beautiful,” a mirror to our society. They reduce tensions, soothe, sensitize, 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 humility 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 socialize 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 merely 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, given the evidence of 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 destabilizing 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, no longer seeks freedom will live in captivity forever. In essence, 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 become a function of 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)