

Erja Anttonen

# VISIBLE TO ONESELF AND OTHERS - A YOUTH WORK PERSPECTIVE TO ART AND CULTURAL EDUCATION



**Erja Anttonen, Senior Lecturer NGO and Youth Work Unit, HUMAK University of Applied Sciences**

Erja Anttonen (MSocSc) is a Senior Lecturer at the Joensuu Campus of HUMAK University of Applied Sciences. She teaches, for example, art and cultural education in the Degree Programme in Civic Activities and Youth Work. The methods she uses include literary art and photography. Anttonen also supervises the implementation of the empowering photography method. Her areas of interest include community art, dialogue, alternative perspectives and the use of photography in different contexts as well as human rights and gender issues.

The original version of the article has been published in: Krappe, Johanna; Parkkinen, Terttu & Tonteri, Anna (eds.) 2012. Moving In! Art-based Approaches to Work with the Youth. Reports from Turku University of Applied Sciences 127. Turku: Turku University of Applied Sciences.

The publication is available at  
<http://julkaisut.turkuamk.fi/isbn9789522162267.pdf>

Series E, HUMAK publications, 1798-3541; 5, 2012

HUMANISTINEN AMMATTIKORKEAKOULU

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Erja Anttonen

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ISBN 978-952-456-128-0 ISSN 1798-3541 L 1798-3541

Humanistinen ammattikorkeakoulu – HUMAK,

Annankatu 12, 00120 Helsinki Finland

[www.humak.fi](http://www.humak.fi)

[humak@humak.fi](mailto:humak@humak.fi)

# Visible to Oneself and Others - A Youth Work Perspective to Art and Cultural Education

## Abstract

The history of cultural youth work in Finland goes back to at least the 1920s, when the first cultural competitions for young people were arranged. Municipal youth work became organized after the Second World War. Today, cultural youth work is being carried out by local authorities, organizations, associations and a broad range of independent and informal youth communities. Cultural youth work is a complex concept, but in the municipal context, it is defined as activity, which supports young people's self-expression and the realization of young people's initiatives and ideas.

Art and cultural education in youth work focuses on education through art. Art and culture are viewed as a tool for both the growth of individuals and social growth and change. The objective is to promote non-discrimination, participation and accessibility.

Everyone has the need to be seen by themselves and others as a unique self: Cultural youth work and art and cultural education in youth work offer opportunities for this process.

*Key Concepts: Cultural Youth Work, Art and Cultural Education in Youth Work.*

## Cultural Youth Work: Long History, Difficult to Define

Cultural youth work has been arranged for young people in different fields of youth work for a long time. Nevertheless, Ruotsalainen (2007, 168) argues that despite its long traditions, this cultural activity has not always been recognized as serious, individual, communal and social activity, and a key working method and element of youth work. Instead, it has often been seen as mere dabbling or one youth hobby among others. As a concept, cultural youth work began to take shape as late as in the 1990s. It was first acknowledged in legislation in the Youth Act (72/2006) as cultural youth activity. (Ruotsalainen 2007, 168.)

As a concept, cultural youth work is establishing its status among other youth work concepts. However, there is no single, unequivocal definition of cultural youth work. Indeed, it can be difficult to analyze the concept as part of overall youth work (Ruotsalainen 2007, 171). In the Youth Act (72/2006), which became effective in 2006, the concept is labelled as cultural youth activity, which at least some youth workers understand differently than the concept of cultural youth work (Tuliainen 2006, 60–63). Cultural youth work refers to organized and ordered cultural activity, whereas cultural youth activity refers to young people's spontaneous and independently arranged activity (Tuliainen 2006, 61). In this article, cultural youth work refers to both actual cultural youth work as well as cultural youth activity.

Sari Höylä (2012, 17) defines youth work as “educational work, which is characterized by young people's voluntary participation”. Under the Youth Act (72/2006), the objective of youth work is “to support young people's growth and independence” and “to promote young people's active citizenship and empowerment”. The growth of young people can be seen as a process in which a young person builds an identity by experimenting and expressing it, thereby forming a self-image. Key questions here are, for example: What things are good and important? What is right and what is wrong? Who am I, and where do I come from? Young people strive to influence the surrounding society based on these ideas (Ruotsalainen

2007, 171). Cultural youth work can support, for example, young people's growth, social empowerment and active citizenship.

This article discusses the following concepts: cultural youth work and art and cultural education in youth work. The analysis of these concepts is based on research data and the experiences of people engaged in the activities, as well as on my personal experience and observations as a teacher of art and cultural youth work at HUMAK University of Applied Sciences.

## History and Current State of Cultural Youth Work

The history of Finnish cultural youth work is characterized by different types of cultural competitions for young people, which have been organized since 1921. Competitions were first organized by the literature association *Nuoren Voiman Liitto*, followed by the cultural competitions arranged by different organizations. National youth work became organized after the Second World War. This gave birth to the Finnish Youth Cultural Competition, which was arranged in 1947–1961 for the members of national youth organizations aged 16–29 years. (Ruotsalainen 2007, 168–169.)

The first Youth Art Festival, targeted at children and young people aged 10–25 years, was held in 1970. Today, the event is held under the name Young Culture. The first Youth Art Event can be described as experimental and innovative. The art forms represented were theatre, comic strip, propagandizing statement, blues, and film (Ruotsalainen 2007, 169). Today, Young Culture activities could be described as part and parcel of municipal and regional child and youth policy. They are regarded as a venue allowing active participants to demonstrate in practice what cultural youth work is and what it aims to achieve. Young Culture activities encourage and support the participation of children and young people in diverse cultural activities. Young Culture is one form of cultural youth work. It can be used to encourage, support and inspire young people to participate in cultural leisure activities regardless of place of residence or educational, ethnic, linguistic or socioeconomic background. The cultur-

al activities of children and young people, as well as working as a member of a group, are considered the preconditions of balanced, healthy and safe growth. (Young Culture website 2011.)

Cultural youth work is being carried out by local authorities, organizations, associations and a broad range of independent and informal youth communities (Ruotsalainen 2007, 169). For example, the Town of Rauma states that its youth work services are provided using “different types methods including youth centres, special needs youth work, cultural youth work (...)” (Town of Rauma 2011). Also based in Rauma, the Cultural Youth Centre (Kulttuurinen nuorisokeskus ry) organized an international youth camp in the summer of 2011 focused on human rights through short film, role-playing, photography and ancient craft techniques. Another example of an organization carrying out cultural youth work is the Finnish Youth Association (Suomen Nuorisoseurojen Liitto ry), which was founded in 1881. The association defines youth association activities as cultural activity focusing on children and young people, and as diverse cultural and youth activities (Finnish Youth Association website 2011). One example of a local youth association is the Joensuu-based Motora, which arranges different types of social and goal-oriented leisure activities focused on Karelian folk dance and folk music (Motora website 2011).

The Youth Services of Jyväskylä and Tampere describe cultural youth work as activity, which supports young people’s self-expression and the realization of young people’s initiatives and ideas, and provides venues for culture created by young people (Jyväskylä and Tampere Youth Services websites 2011). Jyväskylä Youth Services adds that “a young person is allowed to be visible, seen and accepted as an important element of the community. Through cultural youth work, young people gain experience in different roles and responsibilities. Cultural youth work supports young people’s growth and identity formation, and provides tools for developing their self-expression” (Jyväskylä Youth Services website 2011). In Jyväskylä, the definition also includes the idea of young people’s participation, self-expression and creativity enabled by the instructor’s inspiration and encouragement.

The Youth Department of the City of Helsinki (2011) defines cultural youth work as follows:

“Cultural youth work displays the broad spectrum of youth culture. The City provides facilities and events for theatre, dance and different genres of music. (...). Through our activities, we support the creation of new youth culture. Also outsider art receives attention through different working methods and projects. At the Youth Department, cultural youth work provides young people with opportunities to express themselves using creative working methods. Young people can participate in both group activities and various projects. Arts and crafts education supports young people’s long-term participation in the world of visual arts. (...) The methods of cultural youth work offer young people a channel for influencing the surrounding society in different arenas and forums.”

Sinikka Haapanen (2011), who is specialized in cultural youth work in Helsinki, argues that cultural youth work renews ethics, creates meaning and uplifts everyday life. She states that people create the meaning of their own life: cultural youth work aims to strengthen a young person’s self and create channels for developing one’s imagination. According to Haapanen, the development of one’s identity and life management skills takes place in interaction with the person’s internal and external environment.

## **Art and Cultural Education in Youth Work: Principles and Definitions**

The Constitution of Finland (731/1999) requires public authorities to guarantee for everyone equal opportunity, for example, “to develop themselves without being prevented by economic hardship”. In addition, it guarantees the freedom of science, the arts and higher education. Accord-

ing to Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts (...)”. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 31) obligates signatory states to “recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts”. In the convention, a child refers to a person below the age of eighteen years. In the Youth Act (72/2006), the term young people refers to persons under the age of 29 years. Furthermore, the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (Article 5) states the following: “All persons have the right to participate in the cultural life of their choice and conduct their own cultural practices, subject to respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.” There is a direct connection between the Convention on the Rights of the Child and municipal child and youth policy programmes as well as the strategies and operating principles of several Finnish child and youth work organizations.

According to several studies, the Finnish society has become increasingly unequal, which also affects young people (e.g. Myllyniemi 2008; Moisio 2010; Vaarama, Moisio & Karvonen 2010; Honkasalo, Kiilakoski & Kivijärvi 2011). The role of art and cultural education in youth work can be viewed as an opportunity for equality: it can provide young people with access to something that they would otherwise not be able to afford or have other resources for. In the context of youth work, art and cultural education is based on the idea that art and culture belong to everyone. Its objective is to promote non-discrimination, participation and accessibility. One example of this work is the Joensuu-based Harbour Theatre (*Teateriyhdistys Satama ry*), which carries out youth work through drama. Its activities attract a highly diverse group of young people, including asylum seekers, immigrants and socially excluded young people. The activities emphasize the collaboration of different kinds of people towards a common goal, as well as the similarity and dignity of all human beings. Most productions of the Harbour Theatre are based on the experiences and creativity of the young people themselves.

Nearly a century ago, Juha Hollo defined four dimensions for art education: Art and cultural education can be defined as education through art, education for art, education into art, and the art of education (Huuhtanen 1984, 19; Räsänen 2006, 11). In this paper, the concept of art and cultural education in youth work focuses on the first, education through art. Art is viewed as a tool for the growth of individuals as well as for social growth and change. According to Koskensuu & Peltovuori (2010, 17), the dimensions defined by Hollo cannot be excluded due to the diversity of art education – their manifestations can be identified in different forms youth work.

According to Helena Sederholm (2007, 143), art education teaches people to understand, process and tolerate open and complex phenomena and contradiction in art, but also in social life in general. Art and cultural education can achieve, for example, multimodality, narrativity, communality and activity. When the things we consider significant become action, art can create a space of experience, which can be shared with other people (Sederholm 2007, 144, 147). Art communicates information, especially about emotions, attitudes, values and experiences. Art makes these things visible and communicates them by turning the experiences of “others” into those of “mine” (von Bonsdorff 2006, 158–159). The creation of a shared space of experience and the exposure of the world of experience of the “self” and the “other” promote dialogue, critical thinking and identity formation.

On the other hand, young community educator Sanni Soinen (2011, 5) defines art and cultural education as follows: “Art and cultural education refers to strengthening people, activating them into participating, self-expression, and the building of communality. Art creates new meanings and thereby offers new perspectives to the surrounding world.”

Students of community education at HUMAK University of Applied Sciences have applied art and cultural education in, for example, youth work against racism (Koskensuu & Peltovuori 2010), and as part of their practical training and professional specialization projects in youth workshops, refugee reception centres, various youth work organizations and their projects, joint projects of library and youth work, collaboration be-

tween museums and youth work, as well as the “Loytäjä saa pitää” (“Finders, keepers”) project (Anttonen & Lehmusoksa 2010).

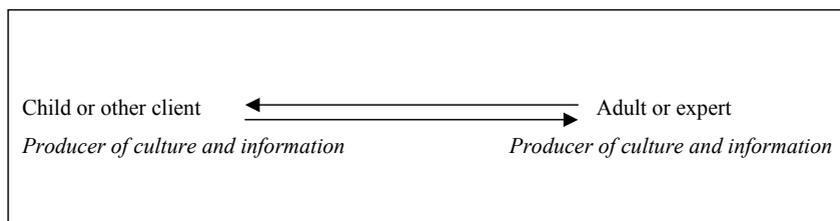
## Art and Cultural Education in Youth Work: Starting Points and Competencies

The core process of youth work is the encounter between the instructor and a young person. How do the two meet? Pekka Mönntinen (2011, 67) argues that in this encounter, the adult instructor can offer key educational values to a young person. I will now examine the dialogical and participatory operating culture developed by Liisa Karlsson as an opportunity and a starting point also for youth work. In addition, I will discuss the role of the instructor in art and cultural education, as well as the art and cultural education competencies required of community educators (graduates of Bachelor’s degree programmes).

Karlsson (e.g. 1999 and 2003), who has studied and developed the concept of *storycrafting*, has defined three operating models for the relationship between an adult and children or other clients. The client can just as well be a young person, and indeed, the models developed by Karlsson are highly relevant for youth work, especially when evaluating how well the legislative requirements (Youth Act 72/2006) of participation, social empowerment and active citizenship are met in youth work.

The first of the three operating models described by Karlsson is called a reciprocal and dialogical, participatory operating culture (2003, 38). In the model, the adult is interested in learning how the child thinks and what the information produced by the child is based on. The starting point for the adult are questions concerning the ideas and reasons the child can present, and the ways in which information can be produced. This approach will provide information on the children the adult is working with. Children’s narratives raise new questions and ideas about how to proceed, what the operational requirements are, and how the ideas of children and the adult are connected to one another. The model does not involve the continuous evaluation of children, and it does not focus on their deficiencies. Instead, an operating culture based on dialogue and partner-

ship is reciprocal, which means that both adults and children are accepted as active, competent and creative actors and producers of information and culture. Activities and their goals are created continuously based on the competencies of all participants. A dialogical and participatory operating culture does not only involve listening to others. True listening and paying attention lay a good foundation for growth, creativity, development and learning.



**Figure 1. A dialogical and participatory operating culture (Karlsson 2003, 38).**

A dialogical and participatory operating culture requires, among other things, accepting dialogue and reciprocity. This means, for example, not speaking for or doing things on behalf of other people.

The tasks of a youth work instructor providing art and cultural education include, for example, taking care of a group and its formation; providing inspiration to participants; supervising the use of the selected methods; managing the structure and progress of the process; and ensuring the achievement of the defined educational goals. The contents of the activities can be based on young people’s ideas – often they originate from the interest areas of the young people involved. The goal can be, for example, a young person’s personal growth; change of attitude; adoption of critical thinking; or acceptance of personal responsibility – the goal can also be communal. The public performance of a work of art produced (e.g. a dance work) is motivating for young people (cf. Siivonen, Kotilainen & Suoninen 2011, 68): A public performance makes the work of young people visible to people outside the group and offers an opportunity for dialogue and direct feedback with the audience. In addition to the actual ar-

tistic process, key goals of the activity are the active participation of young people and the establishment of a safe atmosphere.

A comprehensive overview of the art and cultural education competencies of Finnish youth workers is beyond the scope of this article. Unfortunately, no recent research on the subject is available. The following is a summary of the goals specified for art and cultural education in the Degree Programme in Civic Activities and Youth Work at HUMAK University of Applied Sciences. The art and cultural education competencies of a community educator (Bachelor of Humanities) comprise the following (cf. Lundahl, Hakonen & Suomi 2007):

- a) Instruction: The instructor able use a participatory and empowering approach in goal-oriented activities. The instructor understands that instruction consists of contents (e.g. creating text, music or images), experience and a process leading to results.
- b) Professional knowledge of the arts: The instructor is aware of his or her personal understanding of the arts and culture, is familiar with different artistic methods and expressions, and understands the nature and dynamics of the creative process. In addition, the instructor is familiar with the history, current state and key literature of the applied field of art.
- c) Professional knowledge of the age group of participants (e.g. young people) and the phenomenon/subject being addressed (e.g. prevention of social exclusion, school bullying, communality): The instructor has a sufficiently broad knowledge of the required subjects, is competent in youth work and in dealing with clients in the phenomenon/subject being addressed, and is familiar with ethical values related to the work.

## Conclusion

Several studies on young people have shown that meaningful leisure time activities and social networks represent the most effective tool in preventing social exclusion (Ståhle & Suurpää 2011). In youth work, art and cultural education can offer meaningful activities while facilitating the es-

establishment and strengthening of communal ties. The core and strength of the arts lie in symbolic expression: topics and themes are addressed by turning them into fiction, which in turn protects the young people who bring up sensitive issues in front of the community. Sorrows and experiences of weakness can become strengths when made visible or audible in public through art. (Mönttinen 2011, 87.)

According to the annual Finnish Youth Barometer of 2009, young people believe in the experiential value of art, its ability to function as a channel for expressing critical views, and its potential to open new perspectives to the world. Young people also regard expression as a basic need of a human being. (Myllyniemi 2009, 66–67.)

In her article, Juppi (2012) discusses the meanings of digital storytelling to young people: Digital storytelling can be used in processing the significant experiences and themes in one's life, as well as in examining and expressing one's self and identity. There is also a connection to art and cultural education in youth work: For example, young participants have filmed their participation in a theatrical or other production as a way of constructing their identity. Among the reasons listed by young people for their participation are pride in the work done by themselves and their group, ability to commit oneself to a project for a long period of time, and the mutual support of the group. (Cf. Siivonen, Kotilainen & Suoninen 2011.)

Sinikka Haapanen (2011) has defined the youth work perspective to art and cultural education as follows: "The language of art is so powerful that it can appeal to the intellect and emotions at the same time. Art can address problems, express social criticism, create new visions and enable alternatives." I would like to add to the list the idea that through art and cultural education, an individual, a group or a community can also produce knowledge, physically express things that have not yet been named, and offer experiences of success and solidarity. During the process, people reflect themselves to the world, thereby creating perspectives and expressing themselves – making the invisible visible (Koskensuu & Peltovuori 2010, 18). Everyone has the need to be seen by themselves and others as a unique self: Cultural youth work and art and cultural education in youth work offer opportunities for this process.

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