

# Sustainable Experience Art Park –

a practice-based artistic research project based on international collaboration

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Practice-based research in the Visual Arts has not been especially engaged in the development of sustainability so far. It has mainly been the question of individual art projects, that, however beneficial and interesting, not have taken serious part in the increasing need to change the world in terms of environmental issues. This three year long research project, funded by the Swedish Research Council, will add sustainability to the field of practice-based research in art and design in a true example functioning in contemporary society, thereby being an innovative frontline research project internationally as well as nationally. The interdisciplinary approach of the project is part of an emerging form of research that combines different methodologies and practices forming innovative fields and areas. Art and design are here connected to interaction, information and societal change, more than being disciplines for producing items on a market, in the traditional sense, thereby transforming and contributing to the development of the art and design research field as a whole.

*Sustainable Experience Art Park* is a practice-based artistic research project oriented towards ecological art and experience design, placed at Konstfack in Stockholm, being part of an international interdisciplinary research cluster connected to an Eco-City project in Shanghai, China. The research group consists of artists Leif Bolter, Emma Göransson, Roland Ljungberg and Gösta Wessel. *Sustainable Experience Art Park* project works with two sites, the first one in Sweden and the other one in China. The first one is in Botkyrka, a suburb to Stockholm, constructed in the 70ies, where a green open space is planned to be converted into an ecological wetland park, where art and storm water cleaning is combined. The second area is situated in China, in the new town of Wuxi, where the authorities are planning to build a new ecological park in a planned industrial area. These two sites will give the project a unique setting, and will create an international collaborative dimension to the research in a concrete way.

The *Sustainable Experience Art Park* concept, designed for an urban stressful space, will be developed as a space possible to construct in different environments, with adjustments to climate, needs and taste. This is a ground breaking idea, not just making art and design as objects functioning in a limited area, but as a process intended to be adjustable to different spaces and times.

Being a practice-based art research project focused on sustainability, *Sustainable Experience Art Park* is situated in the research frontline internationally, since it shows how art can be used as a way of making people conscious of their potential to change and of the importance of conscious action. The project aims at achieving following goals; (to):

- Produce concrete examples of how art and design may contribute to a sustainable society
- Develop the research field practice-based art and design in the direction of ecological art, experience design and sustainability
- Generate research methodologies suitable for interdisciplinary art research projects in collaboration with public institutions and industrial partners in terms of sustainability
- Design how a polluted and stressful environment/space can be transformed to and used as a turning-point, where people through a relaxed experience can become aware of the importance of environmental consciousness.

### **Research profile – interdisciplinary and practice-based research**

In practice-based research theory and practice are interwoven, synthesized. We agree with the notion that knowledge of art must remain primarily experiential, acquired by acquaintance and participation rather than theoretical abstraction, so that the synthesis of idea and sense is embodied in an art work (Davey 2006:36).

Art will have a new role in future society, in opposition to the old function of producing items on a market. Art-based inquiry is in fact uniquely positioned as a methodology for radical, ethical and revolutionary research that is futuristic and socially responsible (Finley 2008:71), and that creates critical awareness and raises consciousness (Leavy 2009:13). The *Sustainable Experience Art Park* research project is permeated with the notion that art and design are especially equipped for interaction and information and thereby contributing to societal change in term of sustainability.

*Experience design* is an emerging research field, characterized by interdisciplinary collaboration, crossing boundaries of traditional academic disciplines and industrial and technological areas (Chapman 2005). Focusing on producing experiences, or experiential art and design, instead of producing objects on a market, it designs and produces products, processes, events and environments considering needs, perceptions, expectations, knowledge or wishes of individuals or groups in society. Experience design research draws from several fields, for example interaction design, social and cognitive science, architecture, environmental design, sustainable design, information design and embedded media.

*Ecological Art.* In recent years art has played a role in dealing with social and ecological issues in engaging the public. Perception and communication have aesthetic bases which create an engaging potential. Since the 1960s the relational aspect of art has been the constituting basis of many types of arts of engagement, ecological, social and political. Although their works not often were geared towards ecological concerns, the Minimalists artists of the sixties, interested in the formal qualities of the land, created a focus of interest for art in the environment, producing a consciousness about natural dynamics and human agency in the landscape. Today, for artists working in and for the environment, it is no longer

the formal visual orders through which values and ideas or experiential qualities are implemented. Artists try to understand the land as a living entity with qualities that are intuited with experiences through time. As opposed to Modernists or Minimalist design practices, the “identity of place” comes back to life in their work. (Erzen 2004:23pp.)

### **Project description**

The interdisciplinary approach of the project is part of an emerging form of research that combines different methodologies and practices forming innovative fields and areas. Art and design are here connected to interactivity, information and societal change, more than being disciplines for producing items on a market, in the traditional sense, thereby transforming and contributing to the development of the art and design research field as a whole.

This pioneering project is suitable for urban spaces all over the world in terms of sustainability, transforming stressful and polluted areas into recreational spaces. Here visitors become aware of the importance of sustainable development, and are given stimulating and innovative experiences of nature.

### **Components**

- Art and design
- Site
- Designed water and landscape
- System for water oxygenating and cleaning
- Criticism
- Recreational function

**Art and design** Contemporary art and innovative design, in the Sustainable Experience Art Park, interacts with landscape architecture and technology, producing interdisciplinary and visionary solutions and experiences of sustainability. Instead of functioning as decorative elements in an already designed architectural space, art here is an active part of the design process and the results from the beginning. Art and design functions in the form of designed poetic spaces that problematizes human interaction with nature in terms of sustainability

**Site** The Sustainable Experience Art Park concept can be adjusted to fit various environments, for instance a central area in a city, a former wetland habitat that has been injured, or at planned sites where sustainability and innovative design are requested. The park is constructed in relation to conditions at the actual site and its surroundings, i.e. culturally, historically and socially.

### **Designed water and landscape**

Experiences of water are in the park designed through art in several ways. The unique quality of our most important natural resource on Earth is represented in an easy accessible, attractive, committing and pioneering way.

Landscape design is connected to the waterscape design, including vegetation, walking paths and social spaces for visitors.

**Systems for water oxygenating and purification** Water is purified in a system of purification ponds, connected by constructions for oxygenation. In stages water is treated and purified so it leaves the system restored, vitalized and cleansed. The purification system makes use of constructed wetland technology, where plants and micro organisms transform polluted water into fresh water. It also utilizes natural oxygenating, leading water through

a process of rhythmic oscillation.

**Sustainable criticism** The Sustainable Experience Art Park project positions itself in the frontline of the debate of climate issues and sustainable development. Being an artistic representation of an innovative and critical approach to sustainability, Sustainable Experience Art Park forms a concept where art, landscape architecture and technology interact and merge into a new interdisciplinary way of changing the world. Criticism is here constructive, producing new awareness and ways of thinking among visitors, since Sustainable Experience Art Park actually purifies polluted water for the benefit of the ecosystem.

**Recreational function** The Park is intended to function as a recreation area for urban inhabitants and other visitors. Recent research has shown the vital importance of green areas, plants and running water for stressed people today, sometimes even used as rehabilitation of medical conditions. Recreation and preventive health care can be seen as vital parts of sustainable development.

### **Final remarks**

The aim of this collaborative research effort is to take a holistic view of sustainable urban development, in which the balances of natural environment, economical development and social structure are equally weighed, and in which art and design, science and technology, and social political study professionals will work hand in hand, widely across different disciplines, cultures and regions in a nature-centered, holistic and interdisciplinary manner.

### **Presentation of contributors:**

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