

A POLITICAL CLASSROOM

Apolonija Šušteršič

Tensta konsthall, 2022/23

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Political?

A conversation with Apolonija Šušteršič (AŠ) by Katinka Saarnak and Cecilia Widenheim (TK)

TK: How would you describe your relationship to classrooms? What memories do you have that relate to classrooms?

AŠ: I grew up in communist Yugoslavia, and my entire upbringing, as well as my early experiences in classrooms, relate to being in a school that was impregnated with the socialist ideology of a one-party political system (Communist Party) with a single leader (Tito). My early memories involve learning about solidarity and brotherhood, the main binding elements that were utilised to hold together a large, diverse population (20 million), which included people with very different cultural backgrounds, traditions, histories, and languages, within the postwar Yugoslavia or the so-called Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The classroom was, for me, a place for equal individuals, where there were no distinctions based on class, race or gender. The teachers, however, who held unquestioned power, were characters with various personalities - ideally, a teacher would be a moderator of our fantasies, a motivator of our learning, and a gardener of our futures. (It might sound as though I'm romanticising my early schooling experience, but I loved attending school.)

TK: How has this childhood experience affected you?

AŠ: I cannot erase this past; it is much more a part of me than I ever believed. It's becoming more and more apparent to me that my practice is deeply influenced by ideas I learned early on: questions of spatial and social equality, production of situated knowledge, cooperation, and the use of dialogical and other conversational methods. As a small girl, I was told that our political system was temporary; we were on our way to developing something better, an ideal society in which everyone would be liberated of all frameworks and restrictions.

TK: How did you become interested in developing a practice that deals with conversation and dialogue in spatial contexts?

AŠ: Conversation and dialogue have always been present in my work process, ever since the 90s. Cooperating with an institution and being in dialogue with a curator was always important to me. However, I could say that the power of dialogue and conversation as an inherent aspect of my spatial practice probably became clear to me as a result of Suggestion for the Day, a project I realised at Moderna Museet in 2000. Besides taking bicycle rides to the city and collecting maps and stories, I organised a roundtable discussion, a performative platform without any emphasised theatricality, in which all participants were carefully chosen based on whom or what they represented, as though they were actors in a theatrical play that could be run independently after being kicked off with a few keynotes, in the form of questions and remarks chosen by the moderator in dialogue with me.

We discussed the development of the City of Stockholm at the time and the powers that directed this development. This process has ultimately come to alienate the people who live in the city. The discussion was staged within the exhibition What If: Art on the Verge of Architecture and Design (Moderna Museet, 2000), on a Monday when the museum was closed. The people invited to this discussion included some holding key political positions in the city, along with urban planners, artists, architects and activists who were critical of what was happening in the growing city. There was no audience, only invited participants. We made a point of not recording the discussion, as we didn't want to produce any documentation apart from one photograph as evidence that it had happened. The discussion was very constructive for all sides of the table, and the participants asked me to arrange a continuation of the debate in the near future. At Moderna Museet, and later at Iaspis in 2001, we created a forum for the city, where the debate continued with various invited experts. We sought to further an understanding of the core issues discussed; and we concluded the forum with an international seminar titled Who owns the City? at the Museum of Architecture in 2002.

TK: What past work have you done that relates to the Political Classroom project?

AŠ: The project Political Classroom is strongly related to my previous work. Conversations, the sharing of opinions, and confrontations with people and subjects all enable us to gain a deeper understanding of a situation and, for example, find ways to resolve conflicts or problems. The conversation is a relational moment we share, even more so when we are physically present for it. The development of digital technology has brought with it a shift of our communication paradigm. In my opinion, the screen produces a kind of shield or barrier that detaches us from other people, and prevents immediate interactions. We are still bodies with emotions and feelings that are oriented towards the physical environment and physical human interaction. Therefore, we must meet and talk. The Classroom is a perfect space for meetings and discussions. Almost all of my projects involve the use of conversation or dialogue as research methods, or even as performative acts, in combination with engagement and activation of a specific action. I already mentioned Suggestion for the Day (above). I would also like to mention The Relational Museum, a research project I did in collaboration with Bildmuseet in Umeå in 2005, Community Research Office, 2003, Ibid projects, London, Showroom: Debate Room: Backroom, 2003, Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana. Another particularly significant one is Underground Discussion Club, 2015, which started in an art /architecture project space - Ambika, Westminster University, London - and was subsequently developed in a variety of ways in other places around the world.

TK: You have used the classroom space a lot in your role as a professor – for example, you have taught at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts, where you were also head of the program Art & Public Space. You worked as a professor of visual art at the Royal College of Art in London and as a professor of visual art and head of the monumental department at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm for many years. What is the biggest challenge you encounter in developing and using the classroom in relation to contemporary education and art practices?

AŠ: Creating stimulating environments in which students will feel motivated and safe to develop their artistic work and learn with and from each other, as well as pursue intellectual and personal growth is an endeavour that lies at the heart of my pedagogical practice. Again, it is important that we all (students and teachers) understand that we are all sharing in this process of learning, and that together, we can make a change; we can, perhaps, transform reality into something that does not yet exist out there. I learned a lot about these ideas when I held my first permanent position as a professor at KKH (Royal Institute of Art, Stockholm, 2003–8), mainly from my dear mentor Marie-Louise Ekman, who was dean of KKH at the time. She thought of art school as a place for societal experimentation, “where we can form something we want to see in the world.”

Much is achievable in art education, more so than within other educational frameworks. However, if I were to allow myself a more critical stance here, I would also like to highlight the problems of art education. My artist colleagues might disagree, but art education that addresses issues in contemporary society tends to be too based on individual teaching. Most of the time, students work alone in their studios, focusing exclusively on individual works or projects.

We need to encourage working together, to help students learn how to listen to each other, be constructive, and take individual responsibility in group contexts. Otherwise, our future artists will never be able to make significant contributions to societal change in the future. I have always believed that art is a driving force for change on both the individual and societal levels, not merely for those who can afford to buy art, but for everybody who encounters it, participates in it, or works with it. Therefore, students and teachers must work together towards establishing a classroom of mutual understanding and respect. Also essential is learning about how to accept disagreements and differences, and remain constructive while doing that.

Key pedagogical thinkers that I would refer to as having relevance to my practice include Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress, Education as the Practice of Freedom*

(1994), and the voices heard in the edited volume on Intersectional Pedagogy by Kim A. Case (Intersectional Pedagogy, Complicating Identity and Social Justice, 2016).

Novel approaches to public art which have pedagogical implications include Jane Rendell's portmanteau Critical Spatial Practice and Donna Haraway's Staying with the Trouble. I find it paradoxical that now that I'm not teaching anymore, I received this opportunity to create a classroom, the kind of classroom I always wanted to create within the institutions where I have been employed.

TK: How did you start to work at Tensta konsthall?

AŠ: Well, Tensta konsthall has been participating in an international project funded by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union called Agents of Change: Mediating Minorities (MeM), which is implemented with partners from Finland, Latvia, and Estonia. The director Cecilia Widenheim invited me to join this research project as an artist-researcher.

I worked with George Chamoun, an art educator in Tensta and a group of participants in a course in art mediation. The last part of the course was a workshop of several months, in which we sought to formulate research related to the local context – the Tensta area. The group consisted of a mix of people, with an emphasis on young women of various backgrounds from Tensta and around, who were all interested in learning about art and mediating.

TK: How did you collaborate with the Art Mediators course?

AŠ: I asked the group to focus on the place where they were situated. To dive deep into researching Tensta – a suburban neighbourhood – as a case study. We especially focused on the present time, and what is happening to the public spaces of Tensta, as rumours have been circulating about a sale of a major public institution that hosts a rather important program for the community in the neighbourhood.

In September 2021, we found that this talk was actually being realised, and people were quite upset. Alongside this, we have been discussing important old urban planning concepts from the Swedish post-war era, like the idea of “ABC-staden”, which is associated with Swedish urban planner and architect Sven Markelius. He suggested building suburban neighbourhoods as small city centres where people could work, live, and possibly fulfil their other daily needs (A for arbete/work, B for bostad/housing, and C for centre).

However, Tensta is neither the first nor a particularly typical “ABC-stad”. It was developed as part of Miljonprogrammet – a public housing program in the 1960s aimed at ensuring the availability of affordable, high-quality housing to all Swedish citizens, which ran from 1965–74.

Tensta does, however, display some aspects of the ABC-stad concept. The C, or central part is fulfilled as the main pedestrian boulevard ends in a park with sports facilities (a public swimming baths) on one side and a community building with a library, a meeting place, and the Tensta Gymnasium secondary school on the other side. People live in Tensta, but many can also work and fulfil their daily needs there.

TK: During the research process with the art mediators, you discovered that the community buildings, Tensta Gymnasium and Tensta Träff, were going to be put on the market and sold. How did the group react to that?

AŠ: We started to consider what options we had open to us in our positions as art mediators and guests of Tensta konsthall. Naturally, we needed to hear various voices and opinions on the issue, so we organised a discursive event in February 2022 at Tensta Konsthall. We developed a scenario for the event, which turned out to be a big success, as many people showed up to exchange thoughts and ideas, including some politicians from Stockholm municipality, along with the new private owners of the Tensta Centrum shopping centre.

However successful the meeting was, the main question we asked is still waiting to be answered: How will Tensta Centrum get back to its people, as they desperately need spaces for their vibrant community life? How will NGOs from Tensta be able to rent spaces from the new owners – a private company that seeks to maximise its profits? The questions left are very concrete and direct, and at the same time, they reflect typical lapses in democracy, discontinuation and alienation of public space from its public.

The questions made us feel that the project needs to continue, even if the Art Mediators course is now finished. We all felt that we had more left to discuss. There are also broader, more general questions to be asked, as Tensta Centrum is not the only case of its kind. This led to the second stage of my cooperation with Tensta konsthall, working on a classroom project.

TK: What, specifically, is A Political Classroom?

AŠ: The classroom is an obvious continuation of the experiences and research we’ve accumulated over the last half a year through a pedagogical exchange of knowledge and the course Agents of Change: Mediating Minorities.

ties. As I would like to think of it, the classroom emphasises learning rather than teaching; more specifically, learning from each other and striving to establish a situation that's free from hierarchies. We want an exchange of knowledge that flows from all of us, regardless of education or lack of education, and regardless of age or experience.

The subject is political, a concept that various thinkers understand and describe in very different ways. The political aspect of this classroom is negotiated, and seeks to bring awareness of our responsibility for the society we are continually forming together. Why not question the hegemonic system that's in place, and think of alternatives that could serve us better? The Political Classroom can be a space for experimentation and trials of ideas, an arena for free thought and creativity that can engage everybody.

A Political Classroom project is situated in Tensta konsthall within a space that's already used for workshops, the Women's Café and the Language Café (which is part of Silent University by Ahmed Ögut). Therefore, it was important for me that people who use the space should get involved - they deserved to have a say about the space they utilise. We agreed on a multi-purpose, amphitheatrical structure with a wooden platform in which we can also store the materials in use, and displays of books and archive material that are made available for people to look at and read. The textile elements of the classroom, such as its curtains and pillows, have been designed by participants at the summer workshop and Women's Café under the leadership of Muna Alyaqoobi and textile artist Anna Nordström, in collaboration with Stockholms Läns Hemslojd, the Stockholm branch of the Association of Swedish Handicraft Societies.

TK: How can the classroom be activated?

AŠ: A Political Classroom is a project in progress. We will add further pedagogical tools to it, including an incubator for homeless plants - left-over plants. We will be growing new, edible plants indoors, under growing lights. These plants will provide oxygen in a windowless space, as an attempt to highlight the important role that plants play for our living environments, which need to be taken care of and nurtured daily. We also have a specific discursive program planned, in which we will be continuing the debate we initiated at our seminar in February 2022.



Showroom: Debate room: Back room, Apolonija Šušteršič, Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, Slovenia, Form-Specific, Curator: Zdenka Badovinac, 2003.

Meeting with the Minister of Culture, artists, curators, representatives of private business and local media on the subject of: "Museum of Contemporary Art - Constitutive Act".

Participants: Andreja Rihter (Minister of Culture, Slovenia), Simon Kardum, Nejka Batič (Minister's advisors), Borut Vogelc, Alen Ožbolt, Tadej Pogačar (Artists), Andrej Smrekar (Director, National Gallery of Slovenia), Gregor Podnar (Director, Škuc Gallery), Zdenka Badovinac (Director, Moderna Galerija), Franci Zavrl (Pristop Communications), Adela Železnik (Museum consultant, Moderna Galerija), Jelka Šutej Adamič (Journalist), the artist as a moderator and the audience.



Community Research Office, Apolonija Šušteršič in collaboration with Liutauras Psibilskis, IBID Projects, London, United Kingdom, performative action, 2003



Relational Museum / Out & Around, Apolonija Šušteršič & Meike Schalk, Bildmuseet Umeå, 2006-2007

DATEing with:

*Mattias Andersson / Assistant, Bildmuseet Umeå
 Peter Lundström / Assistant Bildmuseet Umeå
 Brita Täljedal / Curator, Bildmuseet Umeå
 Jan - Erik Lundström / Director, Bildmuseet Umeå
 Katarina Pierre / Curator, Bildmuseet Umeå
 Gerd Aurell / Artist and member of the artist-run space Verkligheten
 Christine Hudson / FD, Docent, Senior lecturer, Political Science, Umeå University
 Ingo Vetter / Artist, Professor, Konsthögskolan, Umeå University
 Florian Zeyfang / Artist, Professor, Konsthögskolan, Umeå University
 Nina Möntmann / Writer, Art critic, Professor, KKH, Stockholm
 Doina Petrescu / Architect, Professor, University of Sheffield
 Apolonija Šušteršič / Artist/Architect, Professor, KKH, Stockholm*

Public Confernce, Bildmuseet, December 6 2007, Umeå

Invited speakers:

*Barbara Steiner / Director, Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig
 Nina Möntmann / Writer, Art critic, Professor, KKH, Stockholm
 Maria Lind / Director, IASPIS, Stockholm
 Fredrik Lindegren / Head of Culture Department, City of Umeå
 Lena Andersson-Skog / Vice-Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences, Umeå University
 Lars Westin / Director, Centre for Regional Science, Umeå University
 Jan-Erik Lundström / Director, Bildmuseet, Umeå University
 Katarina Pierre / Curator, Bildmuseet, Umeå University.*

Out & Around, project proposal by Meike Schalk / Architect, Lecturer at The Royal Institute of Technology (KTH), Stockholm and Apolonija Šušteršič / Artist/Architect, Professor, KKH, Stockholm



Underground Discussion Club, Apolonija Šušteršič, P3_AMBIKA, University of Westminster, London, Potential Architecture, Curator: David Thorp, 2015

Invited debaters: Ekow Eshun, moderator, Dr. Yasminah Beebeejaun, Professor Sarat Maharaj, Dr Jon Goodbun, Professor Joe Kerr, Professor Katharine Heron



Tensta Gymnasium, 2022, Photo: Cecilia Widenheim







Tensta Gymnasium, 2022, Photo: Cecilia Widenheim

Art mediators for change

Agents of Change: Mediating Minorities by Geroge Chamoun

In the autumn of 2020, Tensta Konsthall was invited to participate in the EU project Agents of Change: Mediating Minorities, which aims to educate people in art mediation and how to work with art for social change and inclusion. Involved in the project were four EU countries represented by the five art and culture organisations Cultura-säätiö (Finland), The Latvian Center for Contemporary Art (Latvia), DOTS Foundation for an Open Society (Latvia), Tallinn City Museum (Estonia) and Tensta konsthall.

The project started in the Spring of 2021. Tensta konsthall decided to organise a course in art mediation with young people living in Tensta and the surrounding area. The course participants took part in lectures via Zoom with local Swedish practising art mediators and institutions, as well as internationally recognised researchers in art and various social practices. In the Tensta konsthall group, the participants of the Art Mediating Course discussed the need for public space in general and locally in the Tensta suburb. They pointed out the passivity of the young generation regarding election participation. This was the moment in the course when we invited Apolonija Šušteršič, artist and architect, to join our discussions and further create an artwork in relation to the topic. Her work deals with people's participation and collaboration in alternative urban planning and civic projects in and around the urban/suburban environment.

The discussions revolved around Tensta gymnasium, Tensta Träff and Tensta library, all of which had been announced for sale. The privatisation of public spaces has been underway for at least the last ten years, and has yet to bring any good results, in Sweden or in the rest of the world. Privatisation, as we analysed, is a process where a small group of people profit quickly to the detriment of the majority. This weakens society on the whole, making it more vulnerable to criminality and general carelessness. Further explorations of the subject led the group to convey to the public how the lack of places to meet can affect our society and, above all, a Stockholm suburb that is already socio-economically vulnerable.

In the fall, we decided to collect all our findings and present our investigation in process with the title ABC Laboratory, which we placed at the entrance of the konsthall - in the Small Gallery.

ABC Laboratory presented a list of NGOs and other civic groups working in the Tensta suburb which have lost their meeting spaces; the participants collected stories and ideas from the visitors regarding the lack of public spaces in Tensta, and books, magazines, and articles were put on display as resourceful reading materials.

Our main questions for this course became the following: How can we bring attention and awareness about the privatisation of public space to the wider public in the year of Swedish elections, 2022? How can we activate the public and encourage them to demand access to the spaces they need to perform their publicness? What can we do within the art context to raise awareness and stimulate public action in favour of public spaces? We decided to organise an event involving all of the actors within Tensta's public sphere. Due to the pandemic regulations, we had to postpone the event, but it was finally realised in February 2022. Together with Apolonija Šušteršič, we worked on a scenario for the event intended to bring about our desired outcome: engaging the participants to think and discuss critically and constructively. The main question was: How/where might we provide a community space for Tensta's inhabitants? The event was very successful, and we saw almost 90 people engage in a heated but constructed debate.

The whole process of investigation through the art mediation course and the final event led to a decision to provide a continuous space - a "people's platform" for thinking, working, and discussing intended to promote awareness and engagement in the Tensta suburb. A Political Classroom by Apolonija Šušteršič is, therefore, a logical continuation of our collaborative efforts during 2021. The new textile elements of the Classroom were created together with artist Anna Nordström, Women's Café and Konstverandan in collaboration with Stockholms Läns Hemslojd.

Participants in the Art Mediation Course: Asha Mohamed, Alicia Donat-Magnin, Daniela Jadama, Linnea Sällqvist, Nada Ali, Nora Ordenes Söderberg, Oumaima Lamloumi, Rebecca Beyene, Senait Tesfai and Tatiana Bodnar. The course was directed by art mediator George Chamoun and artist Apolonija Šušteršič.

Agents of Change: Mediating Minorities was an international project run by five cultural and civic organisations active in Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Sweden. The purpose of the project co-funded by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union was to study the use of art mediation as a powerful tool for making contemporary societies more open and inclusive.

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Public seminar_February 2022





Public seminar_February 2022

IS DEMOCRACY
GETTING
PRIVATISED?

How to produce
awareness and
stimulate public
action for public
space?

What will happen with
TENSTA

Träff/
Gymnasium / Public
Library 2

HOW SHOULD
PEOPLE DEMAND
THE SPACE FOR
PERFORMING ITS
PUBLICNESS?

Where is the tax money people pay to take care of the public space?

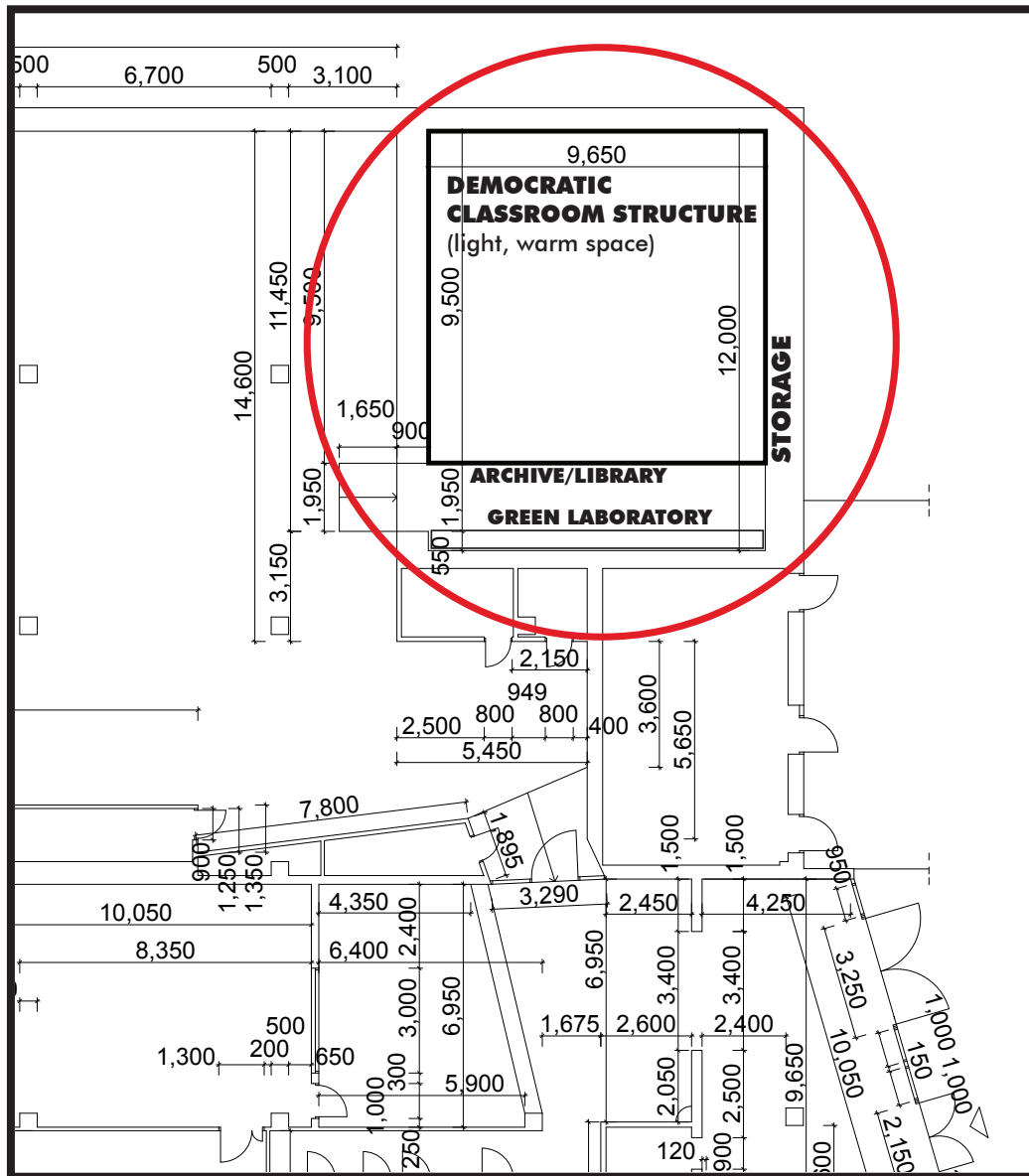
Why is the public space getting sold to a private owner?

How could cities afford to pay for public space maintenance until recently, and now it is not possible anymore?

Proposal for a Democratic Classroom Structure



Project space in Tensta konsthall before intervention, 2021



Textile workshop: cooperation
with Women's Cafe and Anna Nordström





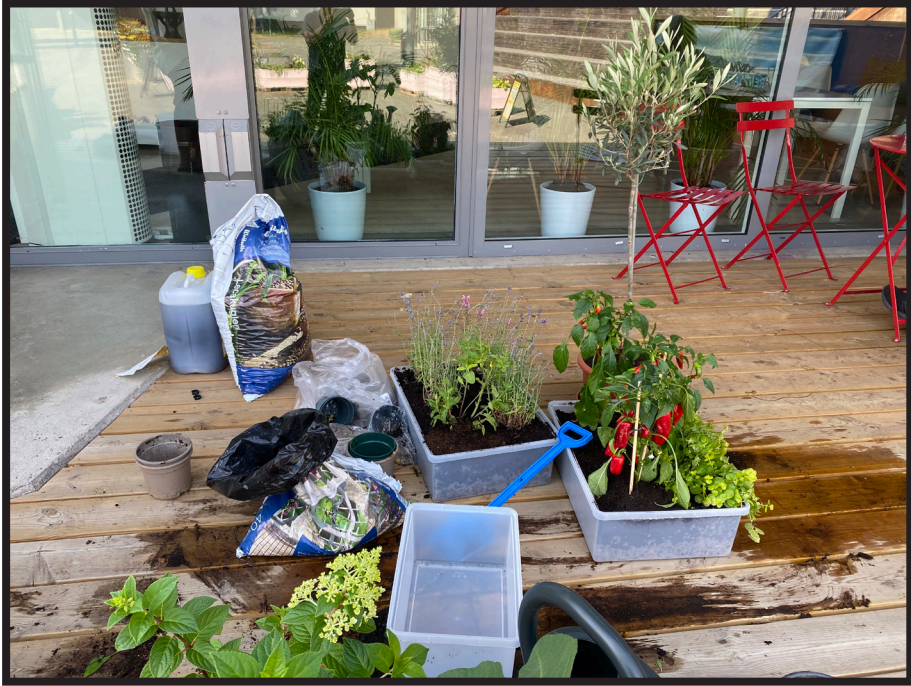
Environmental Learning with kids:

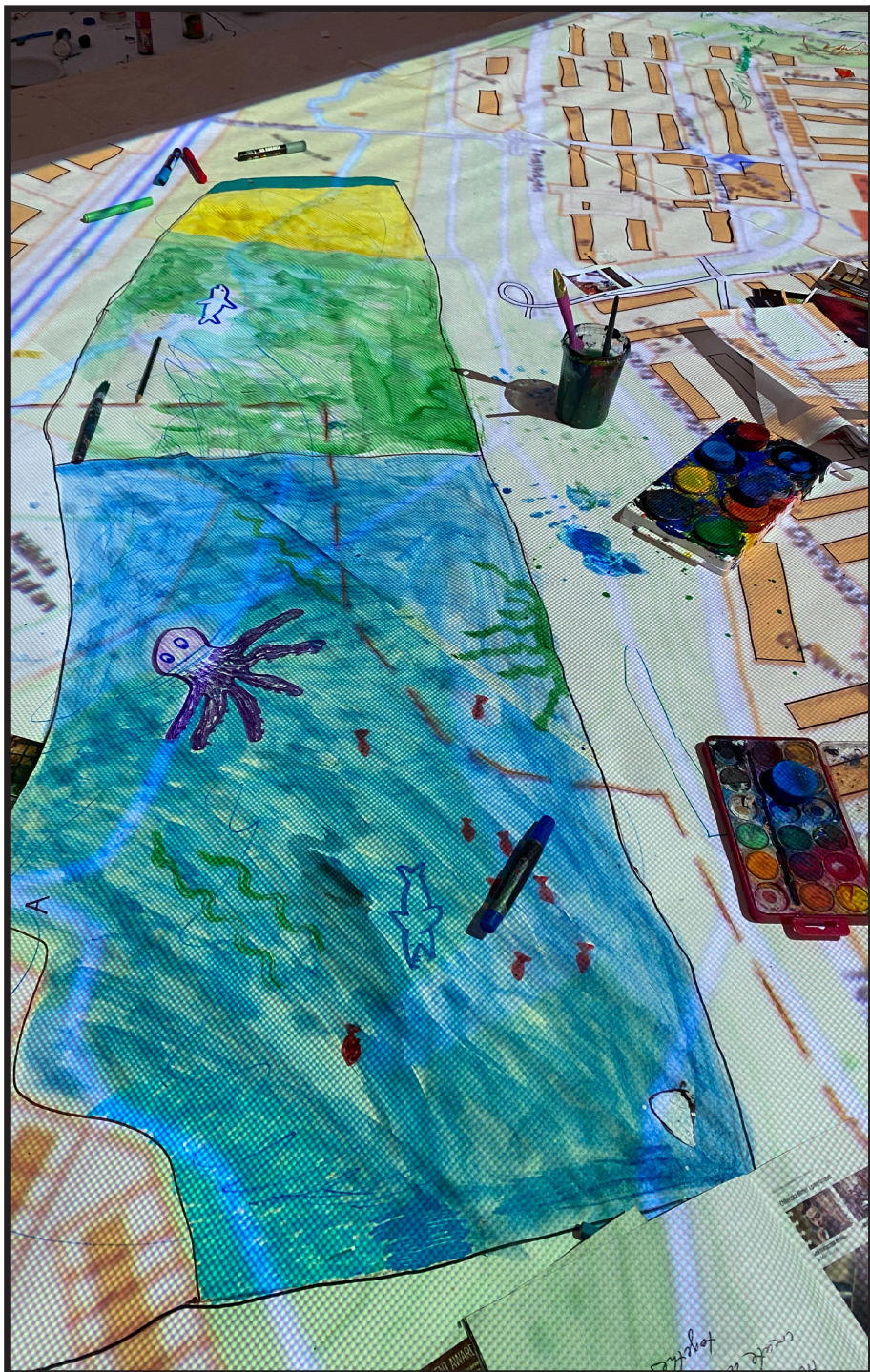
Workshop in cooperation with students and teachers from KTH and Konstfack

MA Seminar Course (3hp) / Free-standing course (7,5hp),
VT 2023 8 Feb 2023

Instructors: Meike Schalk, KTH-A / Anette Göthlund and Miro Sazdic, Konstfack - University of Arts, Crafts and Design, Examiner: Katja Grillner

This seminar course addresses urban environmental learning with children and youths. It explores the assumption that the (built) environment acts as a pedagogical tool. Course readings and lectures will introduce participants to historical and contemporary notions of urban pedagogies and their methodological approaches, such as walking, drawing, mapping, narrating, recording, imaging, filming, and podcasting. The course will take place at Tensta konsthall and includes a whole-day workshop (on March 1) with children and youths and Tensta konsthall's pedagogues. The course brings together participants and teachers from architecture (KTH) as well as art pedagogy (Konstfack - University of Arts, Crafts and Design).



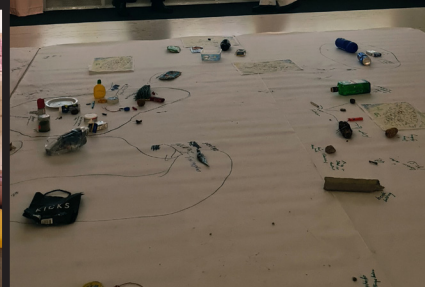


Environmental Learning with kids, workshop results





Environmental Learning with kids, workshop and process



A Political Classroom

by Apolonija Šušteršič

Curtain and pillow design made by women from Women's Cafe in collaboration with Anna Nordström, artist.

Teknisk ritning: Klara Suša Vačovnik

Tensta konsthall staff:

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Fahyma Alnablsi / Reception, The Language Cafe

Olle Arbman / Producer

George Chamoun / Mediation and pedagogy

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Production: Tensta konsthall, Stockholm 2022–24

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