

Performing Artwork in Nature: The Praxis of Holism in a Rural Village of Nepal

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Abstract

This article attempts to explore how art-based holistic insights could be connected with culture, nature and spirituality. The purpose is to find out implications of non-elite art-based activities - simple as well as sample - of children and farmers from different cultures on combating poverty in rural life-world. As an art and design teacher in a rural area of Nepal, I have tried to explore epistemological and ontological premises of Eastern and Western philosophies of religious and cultural traditions connecting nature, culture, fine arts, and human civilizations. Similarly, I have also tried to illustrate the multidimensional problems of human living that can be addressed by knowledge and skills acquired through holistic educational practice from the very beginning of child development. I believe, holistic pedagogical practices may enable every child to reimagine their culture, nature, and spirituality through differently performed nature-and-human-centered artworks illustrating their feelings on culture, nature, and spirituality that helps them to reconstruct universal humanity and promotes peaceful living at the end.

Keywords: *art-based holistic insights, nature-human-centered artwork, soul-mind-body togetherness*

Inquiries about the Role of Art in Sustainable Rural Development

For a long time, I sought a way for art-based knowledge and skills to be brought into sustainable rural development. As a researcher of Environmental Education and Sustainable Development (EESD), and a schoolteacher who has to teach art and design at school, my thrust of knowledge always motivated me to think about how to connect art-based holistic insights with culture, nature, and spirituality. Moreover, how can it critically be connected as a means of

combating poverty for sustainable rural development? Whether art-based practice has any significance on the livelihood of poor village people. How can art education and art-based social activities be a means of social transformation? In what ways can art support the livelihood of poor families of village people in a rural area of Nepal?

Introduction: Discovering Connections between Nature and the Art

It was a rainy morning on July 15, 2022, while enjoying my summer vacation, recalling and reflecting on the past, a narrative emerged based on my experience in teaching art and design to elementary school children based on an integrated textbook (art and design have been combined with either social studies or health education). However, in my opinion, very few credit hours have been given to the art and design (Chitra-kala and Hasta-kala) classes (Center, 2006). It is worth noting, from my experience, that there is a huge lack of trained art and design teachers in most of the government schools, especially in rural areas. Those few non-expert art and design teachers usually read the textbook and instruct to copy the drawings given in the book as a teaching-learning process. Likewise, due to the prevalence of outdated curriculum and pedagogy, insufficient public education budget on art and design course, and weak financial condition of rural schools' students and their family, I noticed that the overall teaching and learning method of art and design course is seemingly unscientific, unsocial, and unnatural to some extent. As a result, the scope and purpose of art and design is failing per se to enlarge the circle of students' creativity, thus, to connect students with reality, society, and nature is somewhat challenging. In such a context, the children have not been able to develop innovative insights into art and design to their fullest, whereas this skill could be a significant means to connect their creativity with the life skills they need to survive. When they lack holistic practice of art and design, I assume it hinders the creative processes related to their performance in other subjects like math, science, engineering, technology, and even in literature. So, nature-based holistic insights must be fostered in

children to have meaningful teaching and learning efforts where students connect nature and humankind through different disciplines. I think it could be described almost similarly to ecological pedagogy (Hautecoeur, 2000). In this vein, ecological pedagogy implies craft with an explicit objective of connection with and reverence for the natural world (Freedman, 2022, p. 2). Therefore, I have very simply been applying a set of art-based techniques while teaching art and design to elementary school children in order to foster nature-based insights similar to those ecological observations of Thomas Berry, also known as Father of Environmentalism (Foundation T. T., n.d.). I believe nature and the ecological world could be one of the best resources of imagination and discovery, and even a significant means of holistic development of children connecting life with nature. For some, reality refers to the conception of our relationship with nature, spirituality, morality, and ourselves: human nature (Jacobs, 2022, p. 1).

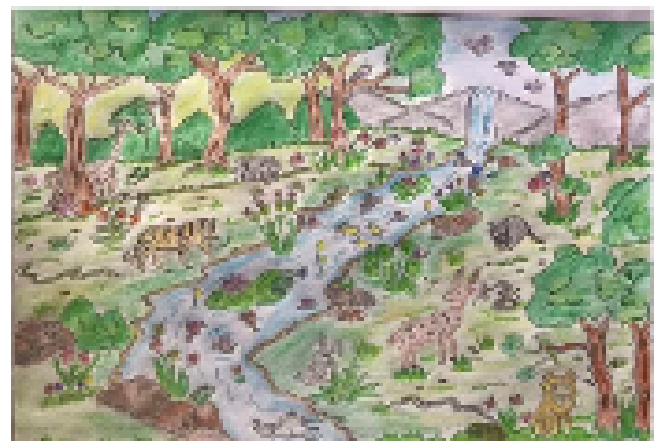


Figure 1: Child's nature illustration

To gauge the children's holistic understanding of our environment, I asked my students to draw images of our ecosystem. My expectations from their drawings were to frame and expose their comprehension of ecological elements and human life and to reveal their understanding, regardless

of solidity, of interdependence of environment and human life, in fact, without any formal art training. One of them beautifully expressed her understanding about mother earth through her painting, as shown in Figure 1. In this painting, from the viewer's perspective, I deduced that she was demonstrating the shallow psychology of her in terms of the natural world. By including different animals, birds, trees, flowers, rivers, and matching colors, she brought the natural world into the painting. Furthermore, I think that her painting reflects that she could have been inspired by the natural world which she consciously thought to be worthy to draw; otherwise, she could have drawn differently. It is a wonderful abstract representation of her due reverence for the consciousness of animals in their ecology. It is a really meaningful expression that reveals the beauty of nature and the harmony among humankind and various branches of nature as the abovementioned painter expressed. Here, harmony is not just a physical harmony but psychological as well as spiritual because the painter did not paint herself rather she harmonized her imagination of nature. In consequence, I believe through this experiment children can develop ecological values by revealing art-based consciousness while replicating nature through imaginations, observations, and expressions. In this regard, the artist is human; himself nature; part of nature within natural space (Haley, 2003, p. 147).

Observing her performance, I believe that performing art could be an activity used as a tool to envisage their real-life or world understandings of their own place-based connections and contextualization. By using art-based expression, children have the opportunity to communicate their love and care for, as well as a spiritual connection with the natural world as a central part

of their being. London (2006) argues that the arts may be understood as spiritually informed language (p. 12). I think children even perceive the environment as a part of their culture because one important emphasis of Hinduism is to guide people to connect their life with nature as I believe life comes from nature and amalgamates into nature in the end. Pattni (n.d.), highlighted that the harmony and vitality of the trees and plants in the forest is guided by the Hindu idea that the whole world is a sacred forest, symbolizing the divine attribute of totality and the interconnectedness of the whole (p. 3). Therefore, Hindu children perceive nature as a part of their culture; they love to worship nature: the sun, moon, stars, sky, ocean, rivers, plants, animals, etc. However, Western views have, to some extent, wrongly observed, analyzed, and interpreted these beliefs and practices. This is my opinion, but I can give some examples. For instance, most of the cultural heritages in Eastern life, especially in Hinduism, are composed of natural elements such as *Ficus religiosa* (Pipal tree), *Ficus benghalensis* (Banyan tree), *Ocimum sanctum* Linn (Tulasi plant), etc. which are worshiped not for commercial benefits but a purposeful ritual (Pattni, n. d.). Similarly, Mount *Kailash* is perceived and worshiped as an image of God with prohibition of amateur climbing rather than preservation of godly image (Sadhukhan, 2020). This is a fantastic way to conserve natural heritage with the blanket of cultural heritage such as mountains necessary for human life on earth either for fresh water or energy resources. I made some unsuccessful attempts to find out whether the Western belief system has similar cultural practices. Rather, I found Western views of nature are heavily influenced with commercial interests of natural elements such as plant and mountain resources. I am not able to review art, culture, and nature at the same time through a westernized

worldview. However, I have tried to conclude through a simple study process what has made art an inseparable part of culture and nature. What makes art a part of spirituality and holistic civilizations? To unfold insights, logic, and arguments, researchers must have at least an epistemological and ontological stand on Eastern and Western philosophies of religious and cultural traditions connecting to nature, culture, fine arts, and human civilizations.

Method: Art-based Ethnographic Inquiry

This study applied a participatory art-based ethnographic research design. It aims to show a new perspective in art and design education involving the researcher as a participant and observer to construct meaning out of artwork. It involves artists' reflexive auto-ethnographic details, including their co-artists/workers. It emerges from the artist researchers' lived experiences, including various forms of data collected during art projects using different tools and techniques, for example, observation notes. In doing so, researchers involve themselves in thinking, designing, and performing art as a public entity. Researchers review the photos, videos, observation, and inquiry notes as data sources. For instance, researchers can have on-the-spot interviews with co-artists. Besides this, they can go for interviews with their co-artists/workers, including others who closely observed their works during the artwork and the exhibition. The researchers used their lived experiences as a platform to analyze and interpret data to construct meaning. Anusha Kassan (2020) has stated that an arts-based ethnographic research design as a means of engaging in ethical, meaningful, and culturally sensitive research (p. 1).

I interviewed some children who engaged in the *Third Paradise Symbol* painting on a big canvas and

a few of their parents, who worked for avocado plantations. They revealed their experiences as a reflexive narrative. Before conducting the interview, they were informed that the narratives would not be disclosed to anyone except for this research purpose. It made them more confident to share their experiences very freely and frankly. Their relaxed mode was observed through their body language, facial expressions, and emotions during the interview. During the interviews, ethical considerations were made regarding interviewees' right to safety and privacy. The consent was taken from respective parents before conducting interviews in a public setting to ascertain their natural opinion. Nixon (2012) highlighted that the ethical issues associated with conducting interviews with children center around balancing children's rights to participation and rights to protection from harm and exploitation (p. 1). The narratives were transcribed into texts that make words a form of textual ethnography. Similarly, a digital album (photos and videos taken during artwork) was intensely reviewed to enrich data sources and evidence. Such sources supported me to develop insights, logic, and arguments to awaken a new generation connecting holistic educational practices (beyond the classroom) with culture, art, nature, and spirituality for promoting a holistic and meaningful life perspective and for living with purpose in a rural area.

Art-based Narratives: A Reflexive Note

The following section outlines the initiations on art-based activities for village children. It reflects the initial phases of art performance in my village with aid from renowned art professors and artists from Japan. It is interesting to note the people of different cultures and geographies collaborating for purposeful art-based activities to stir up holistic thinking in a natural and rural setting.

It was a cold and foggy morning, and I was having a cup of tea while talking with my advisor (Guru), Prof. Takuya Kaneda, from Otsuma Women's University, Japan. He asked me about the possibility of having a group of children from my village paint on canvas. I could not reply immediately with a clear-cut yes or no, but rather exclaimed, "That would be great!" The reason being, we previously had no access to such a big canvas painting. However, I felt it was a great chance to make visible my holistic thoughts about the picturesque natural landscape of my country as the birthplace of the Buddha, a symbol of peace. Thinking and rethinking for a few weeks, encouraged by discussion with a few children of the village, I calmly decided to lead the creation of the artwork as suggested by Prof. Kaneda. After a few months, he visited my village with a huge canvas and more than a hundred brushes of different sizes. He just stayed one night at my home and on the next day we both left the village together for Kathmandu. In the early evening, he took me to a paint shop and bought four cans of primary colors: red, blue, green, and yellow. The next day he returned to Japan and I came back to my village with those cans. However, I was concerned, due to my juvenile knowledge of mixing colors for producing more colors that I shared with him. He inspired me with the phrase, 'do not worry at all.' He lessened my anxiety by sending me texts with resources from Japan, with photos and formulae for how to produce more colors.

It was a sunny morning on August 19th, 2019. We gathered under an incomplete bamboo house, to celebrate the canvas painting with an opening ceremony. This bamboo house was undergoing construction, supported by Prof. Takuya Kaneda and his artist friend, Kuniyoshi Murata. In the beginning, I, as the leading coordinator of this

social artwork, had concerns about whether it would be successful or not. During that moment, I thought of how football players sometimes pray before a game, and I had the idea to inspire confidence in the students by singing a song of prayer that I composed titled *Let us have success in Third Paradise Symbol painting*. We also worshiped the canvas in the Hindu manner, by offering flowers and *Aksheta* (rice with cinnabar) and bowing our heads down to it, as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Celebrating canvas painting at the bamboo house site

After this, the children confidently stepped onto the canvas with the hope of success. Before using brushes, I instructed all the juvenile artists (village children) on how to draw my holistic insights throughout the paintings, representing the natural beauty of Nepal, Buddha, and peace ideology. I showed them my draft and encouraged them not to worry. In such a way, an amazing artistic journey had commenced with smiling hope. Time and again, I would inspire them by standing on the different corners of the canvas, showing them beautiful nature. We all were under an uncompleted bamboo house, which made it easier for us to see around while working. If we were inside a closed room with small windows, it could have possibly limited our observation on natural elements for inspiration and imagination because, in my opinion, the purpose of holistic artwork is

not just to paint nature but to paint being close to nature as much as possible to realize its value for the painter itself.

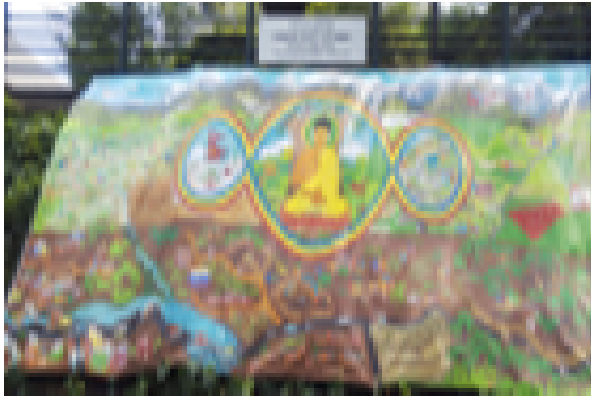


Figure 3: Completed third paradise painting exhibited in Nagasaki, Japan

At this moment, I could say nothing was impossible. Throughout the process of painting, the children materialized my holistic insights into a visible form, including their nature-culture-based feelings and thoughts. I respect and salute their dedicated artistic workmanship which expresses their love. I am indebted to their dedication to long working hours. It involved 25 days, working 8 hours each day, for 10 juvenile painters and myself. Sometimes, during painting hours, some community people came and observed the painting.

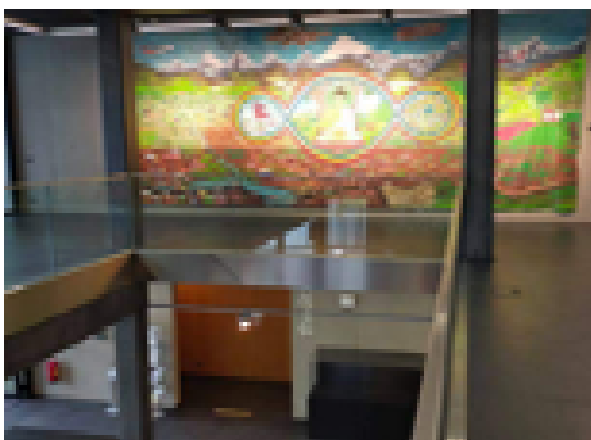


Figure 4: Painting on exhibited at Ecolint School, Geneva Switzerland, 1-29 September 2021

They pleased themselves by seeing such beautiful artwork and inspired us with blessings for success. Hence, it was a socially-engaging artwork: boys, girls, myself (schoolteacher), and community people as well. It is ethnographically an amazing montage, encapsulating art, culture, nature, and spirituality. In this vein, Jeffery (2013) cited in her paper that Klaus Ottmann criticizes Wolfgang Laib's work as transcendently identifying an aesthetic process of spirituality and material world (p. 59). Through dedicated and rigorous work, we accomplished a beautiful canvas painting, the *Third Paradise Symbol*. The *Third Paradise Symbol* is a participatory art-project conceptualized by Italian contemporary artist Michelangelo Pistoletto. This project expresses the harmony of the opposite values such as *Nature* and *Artificial*, using the symbol of the connected three circles. The central circle represents the harmony between the two opposite values. Prof. Takuya Kaneda introduced this participatory art project to me. In my understanding, it is really a symbol of universal humanity and peace. Therefore, in August 2020, the painting was first exhibited at the open yard in Nagasaki, Japan where thousands of lives were destroyed, along with a tiny part of beautiful Mother earth in 1945, because of the Little Boy and Fat Man atomic bombs. The next exhibition (2021) was planned for Barcelona, Spain, but was canceled due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, it was displayed in Ecolint International School, in Geneva, Switzerland in 2021. Next, in June 2022, it was unveiled in Calabria, Italy, during the Erranze Filoxenia Festival, with the purpose of demonstrating how cultural heritage can be valorized through artwork. I believe art is itself a means of conserving socio-religious values and culture. Hence, every culture respects art as a part of nature, their cultural living, and a set of traditions.



Figure 5: *Third Paradise painting exhibited in Italy*

Following a *Third Paradise Symbol* design, the painting displays the theme of the Buddha as a symbol of peace and universal humanity. In this painting, among three circles, the two small circles on the left and right symbolize the cities and rural settlements. It is even believed and practiced that there are different human values between living in villages and cities. The city dwellers often disparage rural people, whom they refer to as *pakhe* (uncivilized). Such wrongly constructed human values foster the self-conflict among the people as being insiders and outsiders themselves. Village dwellers similarly regard city dwellers as less civilized - such divisive thoughts could break humanity in the end. It is supposed that the middle large circle in which Buddha was painted, a symbol of the philosophy of peace and universal humanity, has a different meaning. The middle big circle, known as Buddha's circle, plays a vital role in changing the feeling of rivalry and positive understanding that helps to destroy the conflicted feelings and thoughts among people. This painting not only enhanced the children's knowledge and skills in art and design, but also helped to encourage reverence and the need for nature, peace, and humanity as a part of the wholeness of spiritual beings. Hence, I claim such a painting is a symbol of universal humanity that does not prefer only peace for human well-being for the sake of their peaceful living, but it represents humanity

for human existence in blissful nature – a new dimension of humanity. I hope this painting disseminates a precious humanitarian message to the world as a universal peace-building approach in particular, and as a symbol of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Nepal in general.



Figure 6: *Ecolint response painting*

Having experience from coordinating a successful '*Third Paradise Symbol*' canvas painting, I was looking for a chance to promote my leadership in the art and design education field. Coincidentally, I was offered to lead a collaborative art-based project between students from Ecolint International School, Geneva, Switzerland, and Mulabari village children of Nepal in 2020. It was amazingly designed by the art teacher of Ecolint School, Mr. Gilles Dussabe, consulting with me on the theme of SDGs-2030: Goal No.14 '*Life on Land.*' This was a wonderful collaboration that technology made easier to share ideas, photos, and planned schedules through digital technology: messenger, Viber, and WhatsApp communication. For me, it is a nature-based teaching and learning process to apply non-materialized tools and techniques following the theme of nature: ecological pedagogy, as opposed to the dominant pedagogy that excludes nature.



Figure 7: Classroom wall mural project

We created a wall-blocked classroom mural. Freedman (2022) declares that we formally and intentionally educate our children and adults out of any meaningful relationship with nature, leading us slowly and steadily towards our destruction (p. 1-2).



Figure 8: The Incomplete mural project of exchange.

This incomplete mural on the wall of the community hall at Mulabari village, Figure 7, will be completed by Ecolint School's students when they come to visit and also by Mulabari children when they have access. We had such a plan, but we are still waiting, due to the pandemic. I claim herein that such collaborative artwork is a newly designed and shared co-learning and co-caring process for artist learners. Here, the children from different socio-cultural and environmental backgrounds, and even from different teaching and learning contexts, successfully shared and assimilated their feelings and ideas into a visible form of wall and canvas painting. Such

collaborative artwork hopefully generates the feeling of universal humanity among the participants through physically unmet friendships. As Sanoff (2000) suggests, they could explore the possibility of a connection between community involvement, creativity, design, and construction themselves. I believe children can reconstruct universal humanity through nature-and-human-centered artwork.

Culture and the Arts: A Glimpse

Holistic art practice, in my understanding, should be nature and human oriented. Such orientation is best when it seeks to utilize natural resources for artworks such as soil and plant's leaf for coloring. Similarly, depiction of natural signs to signify the importance of nature is equally rational. The following section highlights the holistic connection of culture and art in Nepali society i.e. *art of nature by nature*.

It was a late evening on the 6th September, 2021. Prof. Kaneda messaged me that he met a young artist, Kaori Sato, who uses soil pigments to express her creativity on the walls of old houses in a village area in Japan. He even sent an image of her beautiful art, which stimulated me to revitalize the use of soil pigments for art in my village. After seeing her artwork, I remembered some beautiful mural art on the walls of houses in my village during my childhood. People, especially women, used to draw and respect mural arts as a part of their culture using natural pigments available around their locality, as seen in Figure 9.



Figure 9: Natural pigment on a wall.

But at that time, nobody had a camera in my village, thus, no record of those beautiful paintings has survived. However, I captured an image of a mural painting on the wall of a ramshackle old house in my neighboring village when I had a cellphone a few years ago. Unfortunately, such paintings were gradually lost due to the natural loss of old generations, especially women. In Nepalese society, women take responsibility for maintaining the neatness and decoration of the house. Especially during Dashain and Tihar festivals, people used to decorate their houses with organic colors made out of plants' bark, leaves, flowers, and different colors of soil. This represents an old style of house decoration using organic color made by boiling the barks of aged Sal trees and dots of different soil colors. It was a historic practice of using natural pigments as artist Wolfgang Laib describes instead of the dominant culture of performing art with water-soluble acrylic materials that can only be acquired by purchase in the city. Acrylic paint has many advantages, but it is unfriendly to the environment. Jeffery (2013) describes how Wolfgang Laib used different natural materials to convey their nourishing and purifying properties (p. 2). The children who are taught through holistic pedagogy can reimagine their culture in a visible

form through artwork to strengthen their sociocultural identity.



Figure 10: Dashain mural: heart-shaped tree

During the last year's Dashain holidays, I painted soil pigments onto my old house using red and white soils available in my village as seen in Figure 7. It was a wonderfully successful artwork using my *soul-mind-body-based* consciousness in art and design: a heart-shaped tree. During the heart-shaped painting, my feelings toward humanity were multiplied in a way that I could not explore through words. The aim of the heart-shaped tree painting was to depict humanity's need for universal peace. For this, while I was collecting different colors of soils around my village, my love for mother earth increased. And during paintings of heart-shaped mural art, my love for the culture of paintings doubled. It is because, during my childhood, I used to see mural/Mithila paintings in every house in the village but nowadays, such a culture of painting traditions has disappeared. It used to be depictions of birds, flowers, elephants, etc., as shown in Figure 11.



Figure 11: Depiction of person, elephant, tree

Such traditional paintings represent their old-fashioned lifestyle and love of the culture of art. For Graham (2007), many contemporary artists create work that is responsive to the non-cultural ecology of local places and culture (p. 2). Hence, various forms of art can be connected with culture and livelihood traditions. For instance, there is a cultural practice of palm print with the blood of sacrificed animals (goats, pigs, buffalos, etc.) on the house as shown in Figure 12, during the Dashain celebration.

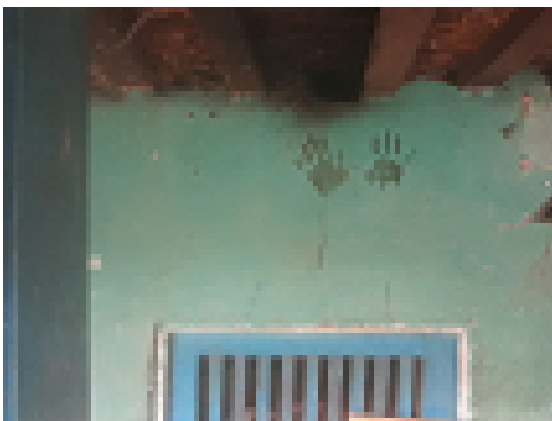


Figure 12: Protective blood prints: Dashain ceremonial markers

When the animal is sacrificed in front of the door (in the yard), soon the worshiper touches both palms with blood flooded on the ground and then prints the palms on the house wall: just at the upper part of either the door or window. I think the blood print is also a part of the culture of Hindu society. The people believe that the

Goddess Durga keeps anything safe in the house for at least a year. When family members see such a palm print, they feel relaxed and safe.

Metal Craft: An Ancient Art



Figure 13: Heart-shaped coin from the metallurgy art project

Metal-crafting is a traditional livelihood practice of the Kami people in Nepal. As our socially-engaged artwork, we have discussed incorporating metal-crafting as a meaningful and socially-engaged art project. It is an ancient art and design that can be recognized as part of the culture of the Kami people. In a sense, the smithy is a holistic school. In this regard, Bishwakarma (2022) opined that a smithy could itself be a holistic school where a child practices ancestral knowledge and a set of skills to develop his being (p.79). Kami people acquire crafting knowledge and skills without attending formal school. My father was truly uneducated, yet a marvelous engineer in his field of *Aaran* (smithy) work; the mechanical and artistic ability he gained without any formal schooling is amazing (Bishwakarma, 2017, p. 131). Instead of formal school, they use an apprenticeship as a pedagogy to teach their fellow crafters. Bishwakarma (2022) stated that a senior expert blacksmith taught his sons and members of the assistant working unit through apprenticeship (p. 82). Since our goal was

socially-engaged artwork, a craftsman was asked to participate in our art project to create heart-shaped metal coins using his traditional knowledge and skills of metal crafting – see Figure 13 – and he agreed to my proposal. Later on, some amount of unusable (waste) metals were collected from the community; the purpose is to reuse unusable metal as a raw material for crafting heart-shaped coins, thus it is an exemplary approach to sustainable art and design. This also supports the Kami's Indigenous knowledge and skills practice. When he was almost ready, he asked me for a sample drawing. I provided it to him, and then he thoroughly followed the drawing to engrave a heart-shaped tree with heart-shaped leaves at the center, surrounded by differently engraved beautiful patterns.

Art-based Livelihood



Figure 14: Regenerating village fruit farming

Viewing the agro-based livelihood traditions of rural village people in Nepal through a holistic lens, it could be seen that there are still dominant agricultural practices of grain crops and cattle rearing. I do not know much about what caused the loss of seasonal fruit farming on a mini-scale that I used to see around the village years back. The fruit was harvested only for domestic use, rather than for generating cash. Yet, some people have caste-based livelihood traditions; for example, tailoring and metal-crafting for Damai and Kami people respectively. As I view such

different livelihood traditions among people of the village, we (myself and Prof. Kaneda, a veteran professor of art education, Otsuma Women's University, Japan) discussed how to help the Mulabari village adapt practices to incorporate alternative subsidiary farming. During the conversation, he told me that the concept of art has widely been expanded and it is no longer limited to paintings and sculptures. Michelangelo Pistoletto's *Third Paradise Symbol* is a good example of this extended art. Similarly, a German artist, Joseph Beuys started his art project called '7000 Oaks' in 1982 at the exhibition in Kassel, Germany (Foundation D. A., n.d.). He planted 7,000 trees as a part of his project to connect environmental and social change through art. The concept of his art project of planting oak trees may be differently adopted in my village to make a better world, addressing environmental crisis and livelihood challenges, for example, deforestation, and poverty. Inspired by Joseph Beuys' work, we concluded that fruit farming could be a supporting subsidiary of farming (avocado plantation including varieties of fruit's seedlings) as a means of generating income for poor families in rural villages. For this purpose, I discussed with a small group of village people and suggested to them that only grain crop is not sufficient for generating income to afford the basic needs and educational costs of the children, including other expenses. It is better to go for fruit farming as a subsidiary cultivation. When they got interested in following my suggestion, I discussed with one of my friends about soil quality and climatic conditions for fruit farming: avocado, cherry, orange, almond, etc. He suggested just mini-scale farming as a pilot test, which can be extended later. For the first time, we started an avocado plantation as a part of the P3578 art project in my village in December 2018 – see Figure 14. P3578 is a socially engaged art project initiated by two Japanese contemporary

artists, Takuya Kaneda and Kuniyoshi Murata. This project creates various forms of arts using the four symbolic numbers: 3, 5, 7, and 8. Three (3) is a symbol of stability like a triangle, five (5) is a symbol of the five elements of nature, seven (7) is a symbol of seven wonders and seven sages. Eight (8) is a vertical figure of ∞ and symbolizes infinity. Professor Kaneda encouraged me to participate in this art project. In the beginning, we planted 3 avocado seedlings and then 5 seedlings. In this way, many seedlings were planted by some households in December 2018. These plants are growing well; some plants blossomed last spring season (February-April, 2022), few trees have fruits as shown in Figure 15 that I observed on November 12th, 2022. Hopefully, farmers will have huge quantities of avocado fruits to earn their money.



Figure 15: First time people harvested avocado in my village

We preferred the avocado plantation because of its multi-beneficial qualities for healing the degraded health condition of earth and human. The avocado plants can fix the nitrogen into the soil that heals the degraded earth's quality for agriculture. They also increase soil productivity, multiply agricultural production, and address endemic malnutrition. For this, Sarah Anderson (2022) stated that environmental education sometimes focuses on how humans can help in

healing the earth without acknowledging the earth's capacity of healing us (p. 7). Similarly, (Kimmerer, 2015) describes how we restore the land and land restores us in a reciprocal process (p. 366). As the next step, some seedlings of guava, cherry, orange, lemon, and almond were cultivated by some people in 2019/20, brought from nurseries located at Dhulikhel and Kathmandu valley. All of these seedlings are being grown well. Hopefully, it will help subsistence farmers in the village generate cash and contribute to changing the environment's foliage: a true greening approach. It could also be one of the significant approaches to fostering a common sense of loving nature, worshiping social bonds and interactivity, and protecting the ecological environment and biodiversity for rural development.

At the beginning of 2021, we (art teacher, Gilles Dussabe from Ecolint International School, Geneva, artist Savina Tersitano from Italy, Prof. Takuya Kaneda from Japan, and myself) had a long discourse through text chatting and video conferencing about a collaborative art-based reforestation project. It exemplifies a scientific collaboration in the field of contemporary art education. Graham (2007) stated that the vision and creation of contemporary artists resists the practice of separation of art from science through the use of technology and scientific collaboration (p. 2). With a clear vision, we decided to develop a forest in a deforested area of the village, planting avocado seedlings in a form of the '*Third Paradise Symbol*,' supported by Ecolint School's children in 2021. For this action, the earth is, in a sense, itself a canvas that we used, as viewed by Hoffman (1993) as some artists work in collaboration with the earth itself to create their artwork (p. 29). Similarly, Gablik (1991) stated that nature-based artworks demonstrate our symbolic relationship

with nature (p. 47). I discussed with community people about art-based afforestation, and they were pleased when they came to know its importance throughout the discussion. For this, Ecolint International School children raised some amount of funds for purchasing avocado seedlings and Mulabari children worked hard recruiting their parents to materialize our idea. It is an amazingly collaborative art-based project among people from different countries and cultures. The first step was planting a few seedlings in a circled form. Next, we made three circles of plants. Perhaps, we will plant more seedlings to make another circle by this year and for the remaining one next year. During the first step, a small group of children, including a few of their mothers, were engaged. The mothers helped to collect fodder from the jungle and animal dung from their own house to keep in the pit where seedlings are planted. Children cared for seedlings by giving them water for a month twice a day following a scheduled turn, as shown in Figure 16.



Figure 16: A child caring for a seedling by giving it water.

Children who engaged in such art-based reforestation in a barren land understood the importance of a green environment that promotes the village's beauty and economic development for the community, helping to control carbon-emission pollution as well. It was a

wonderfully sustainable art-on-land canvas which could be a beautiful spectacle and an innovative way of supporting poor village lives. For Hoffman (1993), such works are for exploring and conveying relationships with the earth; performing acts that cleanse the land, air, and water, and even empowering people to act for a healthier environment is an important for artists (p. 30). On the other hand, children have learned how transnational collaboration functions in the modern world in the field of art education. Moreover, art-based social activities could help poor people to combat poverty themselves by generating income innovatively. For Bishwakarma (2020) if a holistic approach is appropriately applied for village development, it would be a core means of caring for themselves who are struggling against poverty and discrimination (p. 87). Therefore, art-based holistic education could not only be a core means of caring for them but also a means of feeling and promoting self-reliance and self-esteem, knowing the importance of social harmony for sustainable development and a better world to support the lives of villagers.

Holistic View in Art and Nature: Exploring with a Holistic Lens

This would be imperative if I share my insights on the lexical relation between “ART” and “EARTH” at this stage.

Whenever I ask myself ‘what is art?’ and try to seek the answer with a holistic lens, I can see art in everything. For me, the universe is itself art. And, of course, mother ‘EARTH’ is full of nature-based art created between *Eden* and *Hell* according to various religious doctrines. And if you remove the initial letter ‘E’ and the last letter ‘H’ remained letters make themselves the term ‘ART’ which means the earth is an artful figure that lies

in between *Eden* and *Hell* i.e. *Heaven and Hell*. Here is the alphabet 'E' for *Eden* and 'H' for *Hell*. Hence, to my thinking, art-based knowledge and intelligence could be part of God's power which created the universe. So, there might be an inseparable connection between God and the artistic aptitude of human beings which can be fully developed only through the holistic educational process that focuses on *soul-mind-body* togetherness. These reflections chime with Miller (2007) who declares that holistic education promotes our relationships among soul, mind, body, and even relationships with nature and earth. Hence, holistic education, arts, and its teaching-learning process are not limited to designing, processing and producing, drawing, and painting something. Rather, it goes beyond calculation or reasoning. All the things within or beyond the universe are a matter of art; designed by God. Moreover, what we do in connecting our lives to nature for our sustainable existence is almost art: our religious beliefs, feelings, function, and culture are a part of artful life and living; and art-based revelation of human nature. As Thomas Berry says, we are all connected with nature in a way we do not fully understand, despite the fact that our cultural or ethical upbringing may lead us to perceive them differently. I believe our livelihood traditions and socio-cultural practices are artful deeds that make rich our socio-cultural art world. According to religious beliefs and sociocultural practices, whatever we perform from birth to death (even after death) is an art-based activity. For me, everything one does throughout the life cycle is all part of the art-based living process of one's well-being, happiness, and satisfaction. Bishwakarma (2022) argues that holistic education focuses on the holistic development of the child for successful living with joy and happiness (p. 80). Art can create joy and happiness by revealing inner-world subjectivity

and duplicating natural objects and disclosing the abstract self. Hence, an artwork is a kind of revelation of feelings, emotions, and imagination to a visible form or symbolic visualization. For Willem (2020) the arts foster children's creativity and makes them able to transform their ideas and perceptions of the world into images (p. 28). I believe the world is itself art but we need to see through a holistic lens to understand mother earth's artistic nature. To demonstrate, if we take examples from artwork that were performed in my village such as *Third Paradise Symbol* painting that significantly depicts the beauty of earth and human life. Similarly, aforementioned mural paintings with soil and natural color reflects how the earth itself is colorful in various forms and types.

I have tried to realize any artwork as a creation out of *soul-mind-body consciousness* that explores nature and its significant values and beauties. Eastern philosophy of fine arts has immeasurable potentialities for constructing nature-based holistic values of arts and design. Nature is an inspiring source for enlarging the circle of creativity while duplicating it through drawing, painting, etc. Nature is a universal source of artistic feelings and imagination. I believe the history of arts emerged from inspirational feelings about the beauty of nature. Art helps us to open our eyes to the intricacy and beauties of the natural world and promotes our consciousness of a true relationship with nature. For (Jacobs, 2022), applicable metacognition works in real life and denotes natural resources as our dear teachers to teach us about our relationship with nature (p. 3). Hence, the artist must have inventiveness in replicating nature as appears in real life. While nature-based imagination is expressed multifariously in a visible form, one of the forms is drawings and paintings. Any artwork not only

depicts the interconnectedness among various rudiments of the natural ecosystem but also displays the *soul-mind-body togetherness* state of being when something is drawn and painted. Therefore, (Miller, 2010) in his definition of education Gandhi said that the child includes 'head, hand, and heart'; we could also say body, mind, and spirit (p. 8). In the same vein, Inwood (2008) stated that "Art is an aptitude that connects learners' minds with their hands and their hearts" (p. 31). Painting can be understood as a sort of soul-based dancing of the fingers on the canvas, with the paintbrush serving as an extension of the mind. Bishwakarma (2022) argued that metal-crafting is an art in which the immortal soul commands the mind, and then the mind commands the hands (p. 82). Hence, any art-based performance is only possible out of efforts of *soul-mind-body togetherness*. For example, I made this effort while I was painting a life symbol (imagined by artist Kuniyoshi Murata) on the wall of a community hall in my village (Figure 17).



Figure 17: Life symbol: community hall, painted by author

During that moment, my soul, mind, and hand worked so emotionally from the beginning to the end that I experienced what *soul-mind-body togetherness* is. This painting represents P3578 symbolic art of life-symbol. The red triangle denotes number 3 and is encircled by a blue curved line, representing complex life-waves. The yellow part represents 5 angles and black colored

life-symbols kept on the edge and center area of the yellow part denotes number 7 and 8 respectively. Each of these numbers have a symbolic meaning as aforementioned Nepalese fine arts traditions were fully guided by Hindu, Buddhist, and shamanic belief systems concerning nature and its mystical power. Nature is a part of the universe; thus, it is universal. The force that emerges from the universe gives us life and brings nature into existence. The deep interconnectedness of human life with nature makes the sense of reverence to the universe that makes humans to think and respect the supernatural power who holds the nature: for example, I recite a chant like "O thy art above, so my existence here. So, I pray to you for my existence, though temporal." Such feelings make sense of belief in the universal God of nature: religion. Hence, children can construct religious value out of their artistic performance. We believe nature is itself a part of the wholeness of God and its power, thus, we ritually pray and worship it in a dedicated form of practicing nature-blessed living. Hence, our eastern philosophy tracks worshiping the moon, sun, ocean, river, plants, animals, etc.

Conclusion

Connecting art-based activities with sustainable rural development initiatives is a new approach that motivates children and their parents to work together for community development. Such an art-based model invites people from different cultures and livelihood traditions. It promotes the understanding of nature-and-art-based life and purposeful living tradition as parts of the wholeness of the shared public entity. But it is only possible from holistic educational practice in which art, nature, and culture are accounted for as similar to *soul-mind-body togetherness*. For instance, while an art-based soul commands the

mind, it activates the body to recreate what the person imagines in nature or culture. Such unity promotes humanitarian insights that emphasize holistic feelings, actions, and spirituality. In such a model, school children could explore their insights related to their community and society on a larger scale. The past several decades have initiated a movement to link art with sustainable rural development. It focuses on inclusive public engagement in art and design and cultural movements: young children and youth in particular and adults in general. For example, community engagement in art-based subsidiary farming. Such farming will not only be beneficial for dealing with poverty challenges in Nepal, but could also be an alternative approach for sustainable rural development around the world.

Through holistic educational practices, ecological values are constructed while children are involved in replicating nature through vividly revealing art-based consciousness. It also fosters religious consciousness that helps to construct religious value out of their artistic performance. Hinduism teaches us that the whole universe is the sum of the parts of a wholeness created by God. Thus, every part is worthy of our respect and attention. While religious values have long been expressed through artwork in South Asia (e. g. through sculptures), then arts, of course, could be a crucial means of simultaneously conserving socio-religious values and culture and modernizing it as a means to support rural people's livelihoods. Similarly, art can create joy and happiness by revealing inner-world subjectivity, which may help people identify problems related to self-inner-world worries as a public problem. Public problems left unresolved may present a barrier to people being holistically unified against a social problem: poverty. But alternatively, and innovatively, holistic educational practices could

raise the awareness of people to combat poverty themselves through such art-based, income-generating activities by which children can construct economic values of art for sustainable living and developmental initiatives. Because holistic education aims to address the multidimensional problems of human lives promoting surviving knowledge and skills from the very beginning of child development. Moreover, the children who grow up with holistic pedagogical schooling can reimagine their culture, nature, and spirituality in a visible form through artwork as a part of the sociocultural entity that helps them to reconstruct universal humanity through nature-and-human-centered artwork and promotes peaceful living.

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