



# Transnational tomorrows today:

Graduate student futures  
and imaginaries for art education

Guest Editors:  
Anita Sinner, Kazuyo Nakamura  
and Elly Yazdanpanah

UNESCO OBSERVATORY  
MULTI-DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

VOLUME 8, ISSUE 1, 2022

# UNESCO OBSERVATORY MULTI DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

TRANSNATIONAL TOMORROWS TODAY  
VOLUME 8, ISSUE 1, 2022

**GUEST EDITORS** Anita Sinner  
Kazuyo Nakamura  
Elly Yazdanpanah

**EDITORIAL  
TEAM**

**Editor in Chief**  
Lindy Joubert

**Associate Editor**  
Naomi Berman

**Designer**  
Anais Poussin

**Cover Image:** Photo: Akram Ahmadi Tavana. Artwork: Fazila Teymuri.

---

ISSN 1835 - 2776

UNESCO E-Journal

an Openly Published Journal affiliated with  
The UNESCO Observatory at  
The University of Melbourne

Edited and published by Lindy Joubert  
Founding Director of the UNESCO Observatory  
Email: [lindyaj@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:lindyaj@unimelb.edu.au)  
Endorsed by the Melbourne Graduate School of Education



# UNESCO OBSERVATORY MULTI DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

TRANSNATIONAL TOMORROWS TODAY  
VOLUME 8, ISSUE 1, 2022

## ABOUT THE e-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

# CANADA

## THE POTENTIAL FOR LEARNING IN PUBLIC SPACES AND WITH PUBLIC ART: AN EXPLORATION IN RELATION TO THE SDGS

### AUTHOR

Sarah Pearson  
Concordia University

### ABSTRACT

This article delves into the pedagogical potential that public art located in community spaces has in fostering education and meaning-making in connection to the Sustainable Development Goals outlined by the United Nations; specifically Goal #4 *Quality Education* and Goal #3 *Good Health and Wellbeing*. Hinging on walking and artful participatory inquiry as methods of investigation, my project reveals the transdisciplinary nature of public art and I suggest ways in which individuals may strengthen their connections through everyday engagements with art in their community. I draw on a specific example of public art to demonstrate both concepts mentioned and how new knowledge can be gained through the personal explorations of Pierre Fournier's sculptural work located in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. In this way, I explore how learning gained from engagement with public community spaces and public art has the ability to facilitate environmental and social consciousness on both global and local scales.

### KEYWORDS

public art; sustainability, SDGs #3, 4; education, community

## CONTEXT FOR INQUIRY

When considering how the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) relate to art education, I found it helpful to frame my inquiry around connectivity and issues of accessibility, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when accessibility to art and learning has shifted. During this time, accessibility has become a more prevalent issue, making engagement with local communities and art in everyday life imperative. Marsden (2021) believes that art education should be at the center of recovery as demand for the arts has only grown during the pandemic, demonstrating that engagement with art has never been as vital as it is now. This perspective being situated within North America offers some insight as to the function of art in wealthy nations. It also gives some indication as to priorities for recovery in countries like Canada where the circumstances imposed by the pandemic are being remedied much quicker due to access to resources.

In many ways the pandemic has brought forth linkages to *SDG #4 Quality Education* (United Nations n.d. Goal 4) in terms of who has access to art, where they may access it and what kind of learning it may promote depending on its context, particularly when we attend to international experiences. Turning my inquiry towards public art in public spaces and public parks in my community setting of Montreal, Canada, I begin with an acknowledgement of my privilege as someone living in a wealthy country who can walk freely through my community both because of my physical ability to and because I feel safe enough to do so. I set out to explore notions of accessible art and learning spaces within local communities by walking-with public art. *SDG #3 Good Health and Wellbeing* (United Nations n.d. Goal 3) becomes pertinent here because of how walking facilitates connection making within public spaces and with public art. When forming these considerations, it was helpful to look towards the cultural ecology framework (CEF), because as Chaitas, Liarkou, and Vasilakakis (2018) state, this framework 'theorizes the environment by perceiving it as a space formed by individuals' interactions and transactions of everyday activities and experiences' (p. 41). This framework takes into account relationships formed between places and people, and their inherent nature of transforming one another. The investigation of how individuals may interact

with art throughout their everyday lives and within their localized communities follows: As community members define the public spaces in which public art is located, they ultimately determine how it will function. Public art is shaped by the individuals who interact with it, the location it is situated in, and the world surrounding it. All of these factors are in a constant state of change, so our perception and relationship to public art has and will continue to evolve over time. These evolutions are present in our perceptions of some historical monuments like the statue of James McGill, which was removed from McGill University's Montreal campus following repeated acts of vandalism due to the university founder's colonial legacy of enslaving Black and Indigenous peoples (Olivier 2021).

As part of the process of inquiry, I analyze my own experience seeking out and engaging with public art within my community, and its potential for creating transdisciplinary connections to fields beyond art education. This demonstrates how public art has the potential to engage SDGs beyond Goal 3 and 4, suggesting that there are always opportunities for the relationship between art education and sustainability to expand. The transdisciplinary perspectives that are offered by public art open the door for connections to be made across multiple domains. This not only promotes knowledge production across multiple subjects simultaneously, but exemplifies how this knowledge is constructed in relation to, and how it is influenced outside of the typical bounds of each field of study that is invoked.

## THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

The fourth SDG outlined by the United Nations aims to ensure education for individuals of all ages is free, of high quality, and inclusive and equitable (United Nations n.d. Goal 4). The targets outlined for this goal focus heavily on school education, and while I cannot argue against the value of access to institutionalized education, I do think there is room to highlight the importance of nonconventional forms of learning, including learning that takes place within the community. Hunter (2019) solidifies this, stating, 'Through lived experience we become attuned to and immersed within particular cityscapes, forging a sense of connection between self and site in which urban landmarks,

preferred routes, memories and associations are embedded' (p. 126). For me, this indicates how imperative it is for members of all communities to have access to art in public spaces; this could include public parks, public libraries, and public art situated within the landscape. As an art educator, I believe there are valuable connections to be made when individuals are able to forge their own paths outside of traditional learning environments, as the future of art education lies in the gaps which have yet to be filled. These gaps may be the needs of our communities and environment that must be met in the future. These gaps express the necessity for SDGs, in this case, #4 and #3, to be employed perhaps even beyond the ways they were initially intended.

It is also important to note the impact of the pandemic on the ability to engage Goal 4. Because of school closures globally, there has been a significant impact to access and quality education has decreased (United Nations, Economic and Social Council 2021). This makes another argument as to why learning in community spaces is important, especially when there are no other sites for learning available. Even as we in North America begin to resume everyday activities, we must recognize the limitations to school education, as no system is without its flaws. This includes individuals who may not be served by traditional school systems or those beyond school age, as learning takes place at every age and everyone deserves the opportunity to engage with rich learning materials, which are part of the public domain within their communities. Extending beyond my perspective situated in my local community, it is helpful to recognize that on a global scale similar issues of lack of access to art and education exist. Outside of wealthy nations such as Canada, traditional education remains inaccessible to the majority of the world, for reasons beyond those imposed by the pandemic alone.

## METHODOLOGICAL DISPOSITIONS

With the quest to engage both public art and walking as a pedagogical activity, my inquiry aligned with the essence of the SDGs in a number of ways. Walking facilitates good mental and physical health by providing opportunities to get moving, to breathe fresh air and to refresh thinking, which directly links to SDG #3 *Good health and Well-Being*. Walking has enormous pedagogical potential,

and in consideration of everyday experiences and engagements with local communities Yoon-Ramirez (2021) offers the concept of '*walking-sensing*' as a valuable practice inviting individuals to engage with their environment, acquire knowledge and build a community of learning. It is through the active engagement of our senses while walking that critical reflection and recognition of value in everyday routines comes to the fore (119). However, considering the accessibility implications of walking, it is important to note that walking is not something that everyone can easily participate in. Whether it be due to physical limitations or perhaps barriers imposed by dangerous conditions, the ability to walk freely or without difficulty is not a privilege afforded to everyone, and walking for choice versus necessity is another key socio-cultural and economic consideration. Here we can examine how walking may not always be a painless or positive experience. Such is the case for individuals who undertake treacherous journeys seeking migration or refuge in countries they believe will provide them with a better life. This takes place in Canada, where individuals are faced with high winds and freezing temperatures, sustaining injuries like frostbite while trekking through mud, water and snow to cross borders (Markusoff 2017). Because of these implications, I feel the concept of walking can be extended to movement in many forms: riding the bus, travelling with a wheelchair, or perhaps even moving through space virtually.

Another helpful consideration related to the exploration of public art is artful participatory inquiry, as outlined by Grushka and Holbrook (2019). In their argument, public art is an opportunity for research to be spatially connected and to take place in real-time as an interactive investigation that can rely on digital tools to decentralize the individual and reveal new knowledge. This method is described to be 'particularly pertinent in modern, cross-disciplinary, problem-solving contexts' (Grushka & Holbrook 2019: 191). Therefore, I feel such artful inquiry serves this project well as public art and learning in public spaces has the ability to create connections across domains due to its transdisciplinary nature. I explore this further throughout my own public art explorations as a form of practice.



## PRACTICE-BASED DELIBERATIONS

Setting out on my investigation of public art within my community I turned to [artpublicmontreal.ca](http://artpublicmontreal.ca) to facilitate my inquiry and perhaps to immerse myself in the position of a curious community member who may be seeking ways to connect and learn in ways that help to activate the SDGs. This led me to Pierre Fournier, a Quebec artist known for his public sculpture work which integrates elements of technology, kinesthetics and interactivity from viewers and/or the environment. This brings back ideas of transdisciplinary learning and the potential for which public art has in fostering it. I visited Fournier's sculptures *Tours de Mains* (1999) located in the Montreal borough, Plateau-Mont-Royal (see Figure 1), this sculpture aims to combine art, science and nature as it is modelled after a gyroscope (for more information, visit [Art Public Montreal](http://Art Public Montreal)). Returning to the concept of artful participatory inquiry, this sculpture proved to be a compelling point of my project because it is influenced by the environment and moves depending on wind patterns. It also comments on human participation by reflecting the manual labour or work performed by the students of the Montreal Motorized Equipment Trade School where it is located.

My exploration of this work provided me with the opportunity to learn something new and connect to knowledge outside of my domain of expertise in art education. Specifically, as an artist, I gained a new understanding of the relationship between science and nature, and how moving parts can be influenced and even powered by natural occurrences. Although I understand this phenomenon, experiencing it firsthand and seeing the ability of wind to affect change generated thoughts related to renewable energy sources, such as the large wind turbine farms emerging internationally. Interestingly enough, the International Renewable Energy Agency (2019) has stated that large wind turbine fields are achieving more energy production at lower costs, projecting that by 2050, 35% of electricity needs can be fulfilled by wind (p. 11). This could suggest that wind technology may become more integrated into our everyday landscape (see for more information the [Future of Wind](#) report). This kind of understanding is exactly what I set out to achieve in trying to situate myself as a member of the community, allowing me to move beyond the knowledge I already held of public art in my position as artist/researcher/teacher to think *differently*.



**Figure 1.**

Photograph by Sarah Pearson of Pierre Fournier, *Tours de Mains* (1999), aluminum and galvanized steel. In my first encounter with the sculptures; I noticed they appeared different than the photographs of them included on the Art Public Montreal website, suggesting they are in a constant state of change.

When I first chose to visit this sculpture there was very little wind, thus I initially felt as though I missed out on the full experience of seeing Fournier's sculpture in action. Upon reflection, I realized this was a pedagogic prompt, facilitating further response and even several returns to the site (see Figure 2). This led me to explore the photographic potential of public art and to document changes that may not be visible in just one visit to a site. In my case, the physical changes were continually influenced by environmental factors that needed to be documented over time. Observing the physical,

seasonal, and climatic changes of the sites I visited, and my immediate environments by extension, enabled me to develop ecological, social and cultural sensitivity, fostering a sense of responsibility for maintaining and perhaps bettering communities. For those of us who engage with public art throughout our daily lives, we become familiar with sites and begin to recognize even the smallest changes to them, and when we chose to document our visits, we extend our engagements with public art and public spaces beyond observation. Roldan, Mena-De-Torres and Genaro-Garcia (2018) describe their sequential photographic series as an effective tool in describing such processes of change, as it offers instant results in the ability to track even the smallest changes and generate a comprehensive picture of a process or narrative (p. 71).

The learning potential that exists within public art and in public spaces is considerable when visiting and viewing them alone. However, I propose that if individuals can further their interaction by making repeated visits or even by producing something such as photographs in response, then they may be able to move beyond existing knowledge to gain deeper understandings. This is where the pedagogy resides.

It became evident in my own exploration of Fournier's work that drawing connections to renewable energy allowed me to build understanding beyond the sculptural work alone, to appreciate the work in relation. I believe such encounters allow us to reconnect to the UN SDGs differently, because becoming attuned to changes in our immediate environments, no matter how small, fosters global citizenship by allowing individuals to draw connections between the issues faced in their local communities and the wider world. It also builds environmental and social awareness in that the more we engage with our communities and environment, the more learning takes place. And finally, this develops empathy, as an understanding of how our individual circumstances can translate to shared experiences, shared concern, and ultimately collective action.



**Figure 2.**

Photographed by Sarah Pearson. *Tours de Mains* (1999), close up. After spending more time with the sculptural work, I tried to piece together how it worked. I concluded that the sculptural elements, influenced by wind, were responsible for propelling movement of the metal hands located in the center of each sculpture.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this discussion, my goal was to demonstrate the importance of public art situated within localized communities as sources of accessible education, and as sites of meaningful connections, all readily available during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this way, public art reinforces the purpose of *SDG #4 Quality Education*. Within the context of this project, accessible education has proven to be learning which can take place outside of the walls

of the classroom, for individuals from infancy to the elderly. Such sources of knowledge within our local communities are opportunities to rethink art education as sites that can be developed further through continuous site engagement. The pandemic has highlighted the necessity for unconventional learning experiences, and collectively, public art offers another way to learn, in addition to schools, museums and public services, particularly since many communities were cut off from traditional venues over the course of the last years. Preceding the pandemic, many communities throughout the world still lacked access to alternate modes of delivery and engagement, which calls for even more development and virtual sharing, as fundamental to human life. Although Goal #4 aims to achieve this, the recognition of informal spaces as sites for learning and how we can better share the wealth of art and culture globally, becomes even more imperative in communities where traditional educational resources are restricted for a host of reasons. As an art educator, this is my priority for the future.

The value of learning in outdoor spaces was revealed through the whole of this paper because of my access to art and environments where climate awareness is expressed. This may not have happened if we were not pushed to spend more time outdoors during the pandemic. Previously, teaching and learning were exclusively born in indoor spaces only. Moving forward with new understandings of the learning possibilities of outdoor spaces, the pandemic has acted as a catalyst for art education to expand. Through my position as artist/researcher/teacher, I was able to identify the pedagogic potential offered by exploring public art through walking, while continuing to gain knowledge outside of my domain to inform this project. I set out to highlight how walking as a method of inquiry may enable a valuable connection related to everyday experiences as well as facilitate healthy habits, which extends to strengthening SDG #3, *Good health and Well-Being*. Moreover, through my engagement with Pierre Fournier's sculptural work located in my community, the transdisciplinary nature of public art was revealed in its ability to bridge several realms of knowledge, including art, science and nature. Finally, this inquiry has revealed the value in establishing regular interactions with public art as a driving factor in becoming more environmentally observant, culturally sensitive and empathetic on both global and local scales.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Art Public Montreal. (n.d.). Tours de Mains. Accessed 10 November 2021 at <https://artpublicmontreal.ca/en/oeuvre/tours-de-mains/>

Chaitas, S., Liarkou, G., & Vasilakakis, V. (2018). A/r/tography: A fluid relationship of theory, time and place. In A. Sinner, R. L. Irwin, & T. Jokela (Eds.) *Visually provoking: Dissertations in art education*. Rovaniemi, Finland: Lapland University Press.

Grushka, K., & Holbrook, A. (2019). Examining the case for artful participatory inquiry in the Visual Art Education Doctorate. In A. Sinner, R. L. Irwin, & J. Adams (Eds.) *Provoking the field: International perspectives on visual arts PhDs in education*. Bristol: Intellect Books.

Hunter, V. (2019). Vernacular mapping: Site dance and embodied urban cartographies. *Choreographic Practices*, 10(1), 127-144.

International Renewable Energy Agency. (2019). Future of wind. [https://www.irena.org//media/Files/IRENA/Agency/Publication/2019/Oct/IRENA\\_Future\\_of\\_wind\\_2019.pdf](https://www.irena.org//media/Files/IRENA/Agency/Publication/2019/Oct/IRENA_Future_of_wind_2019.pdf)

Markusoff, J. (2017). The new underground railroad. *Maclean's*, 3 February. <https://www.macleans.ca/the-new-underground-railroad-to-canada/>

Marsden, R. (2021). Arts education should be at the core of the COVID-19 recovery plan. *Educational Journal Review*, 27(2), 34-36. <https://lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=151654801&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

Olivier, A. (2021). McGill University removes contentious statue of founder James McGill from downtown campus. *Global News*, 9 July. <https://globalnews.ca/news/8017424/mcgill-university-removes-contentious-statue-of-founder-james-mcgill-from-downtown-campus/>

Roldan, J., Mena-De-Torres, J., & Genaro-Garcia, N. (2018). Researching education through visual instruments in a/r/tography: Photographic images in doctoral dissertations. In A. Sinner, R. L. Irwin, & T. Jokela (Eds.) Visually provoking: Dissertations in art education. Rovaniemi, Finland: Lapland University Press.

United Nations. (n.d.). Goal 3. Accessed 10 November 2021 at <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal3>

United Nations. (n.d.). Goal 4. Accessed 10 November 2021 at <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>

United Nations, Economic and Social Council. (2021). Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Report of the Secretary General. United Nations. <https://undocs.org/en/E/2021/58>

Yoon-Ramirez, I. (2021). Walking-sensing as a decolonial art and pedagogical practice. *International Journal of Education Through Art*, 17(1), 115-133.