

Jakoba Sraml from NCK interviews Veera Jalava, the winner of the heritage learning award, 2012

J: Where did you get the inspiration to use the concept of education through street art with the group of elderly citizens?

V: I believe in the first place it happened when I was working in the museum as a museum educator. I was given a wall inside of the museum, it was called the project room, and they told me to invite there a group of young children to make something out of it, whether a big painting or something. Then I started to think that, at least in Finland, I believe the children are given more opportunities to do art than senior citizens and they many times use their hands and fingers and do something experimental, more than the seniors. So this is the first idea. And then the more I thought about it, I was thinking “why not”. Because the famous graffiti artists, they are already in middle age, so I didn’t understand actually why the graffiti is always just related to youngsters. That’s an interesting question.

J: Which objective was the priority for you at the beginning? Was it the use of street art to achieve development goals? Or were the development goals the most important factor and you had developed this concept in order to achieve them?

V: I believe in the first place, at the beginning and all the way there had been two sides. There just have to be two sides. The first is my own love for street art, obviously and my will to expand the knowledge of street art and then the other part are the seniors and how I believe that this is a good thing for them. And I also want to expand the definition of old people that they are not grey and they are not boring at all. And actually they are not prejudiced. They have been very eager to learn this.

J: The topic of the aging population is highly relevant in today’s society. The question is how the society will be able to sustain the growing social group and respond to their necessities. How is in your opinion the approach you have developed serving the new needs of the aging society?

V: Well yes, the aging society is a very important question of our times and I think my achievements or my goals with the graffiti may not be at the centre here, but are offering new methods and new topics for everyone who wants to learn and it doesn’t matter how old you are. I think everyone should be given new opportunities, yes. I think that is the question and the answer.

J: When elderly people meet with street art obviously positive individual and social effects are achieved as we can see from presentations of your workshops. What is in your opinion the characteristic of art, specifically street art, which sparks and enhances these positive individual and social processes as empowerment, inclusion and cohesion? What is the characteristic that in your opinion other methods do not possess and makes you stick with creating projects with street art (and not for example oil painting)?

V: Well, if you compare this with making oil painting, the first thing which comes to my mind is that graffiti is, this is a very practical thing, that graffiti is a very physical form. You have to bend and you have to stretch, and I believe this is like a great exercise for the elderly. This is the first thing but then, even more important is that street art is strictly the art of our time and when you give an elderly or old people a chance to confront this kind of art, she or he can feel how they are related to our time and the society and they are like an active part of it. This is the basic and the thing that I'm working with here and what I want to show that everyone should be given a chance to be an active citizen, no matter what your age is. Also I have tried to connect through this project youngsters. For example we have had young people or creative writers from a village to follow our work and they have been connecting for the first time with this elderly people that had been living in the same village the whole their life. They have like found each other and they respect each other and their work.

J: What would you recommend to creators of social development plans? How and in what extent can or must be arts and culture implemented into these plans in your opinion?

V: I think there is no question that art and culture are very important and good for social development and yes, I highly recommend considering in every movement to take them along and to develop them and to give more chances for people to confront art, even in surprising places and not only inside the cultural buildings. It should be like a daily part of your life.

J: What are your future plans? Is it expanding the existing concept to different countries, societies and communities or will you be expanding your approach with new art techniques and to other social groups.

V: I will definitely stay with the street art and I'm already teaching people in different age groups. Also last week I had a group of youngsters and I believe I'd love to expand it to other countries, the concept, and also to make some kind of chain between the elderly people in different places who have been taking a part in this. This is what I find a very fascinating idea, maybe to work only with drawings and send them from place to place, because these elderly people don't have a common language and they don't use the internet. So this is maybe a thing that no one gives so much attention anymore because the society is going so fast towards the technical development, but there are still hundreds and thousand of people who can't do that. So I'd love to make some kind of network of drawing. I would like to see people from different cultures and to work with them and to learn from them.

J: Will you be trying to find some partners across Europe to make a project, or maybe European Union funded projects?

V: That would be great, yes, but I am only one person. I haven't had so much time for that or haven't thought of that yet, but every opportunity I am given, I will take gladly.