

Workshop III: Environmental Art with Jan van Boeckel and Ceciel Verheij

This year's Freiburg Forum on Environmental Governance was designed to inspire innovative ideas in the first day and engage the participants into being creators themselves in the second.

The idea of offering an art workshop during the "Inspiring Change towards a Green Economy" conference must have raised a lot of brows and seemed strange to many. This workshop, organized by a team of two MEG students, Sophia Carodenuto (USA) and Brindusa Birhala (Romania), also had a rocky destiny throughout the planning of the conference: There were moments in which its realisation appeared unsure, and there were also many obstacles to overcome. But it must have been our strong belief in the empowerment that art can offer people to realize their potential as change-makers that led to its successful completion on Saturday, the 26th of February 2011.

We had the honour of welcoming Jan van Boeckel and Ceciel Verheij, two artists from the Netherlands concerned with environmental education. A 6 hour workshop connected the process of art making with the themes and issues tackled by our speakers in the first day of the conference.

The workshop consisted of 3 separate activities for which no prior experience was necessary, only the openness and enthusiasm to engage. By the quality of discussion at the end of each part, we can safely claim that our 24 participants displayed plenty of both.

The first activity was accompanied by live music, kindly offered to us by MEG alumnus Peter Volz and his gifted group of friends. The participants formed a circle around the musicians and one by one stroke the surface of a huge canvas with different colours until a common painting was created. The airy, meditative atmosphere induced by various Indian musical instruments inspired the participants to immerse into the process and paint quietly while knowing that the final result is left open and cannot be controlled by them as individuals. Jan suggested to the group to look out the window at the large tree in the yard of the Faculty building and draw inspiration from nature.

Later, the workshop passed to another natural material – clay – out of which the students moulded a series of transformations of organic forms. The activity was again process-oriented as each of the participants had to develop a new form inspired by the one of the person ahead had left. In the end, we all admired the series of 4 metamorphoses and the participants took pictures of their ephemeral forms.

The same clay was later gathered and used in the last activity: making of mini-me. The participants were seated at tables and given a lump of clay each, out of which they made smaller sculptures of their seated bodies, according to how their body parts felt. Ceciel and Jan were given vocal instructions because the participants were asked to keep their eyes closed throughout the process and genuinely imagine every part of their body and their impression of it. Most participants had a lot to talk about this process afterwards and were very impressed with the results which were indeed humanoid-shaped, and perhaps resembling their inner selves.

The results of the workshop - painting and mini-me sculptures - were displayed and celebrated during the closing ceremony. The large common painting will be displayed in the Faculty building as a reminder of this inspiring workshop.

We are very grateful to the two fantastic coordinators Jan and Ceciel, to the magical group of musicians, to our logistics team for preparing a seasonal and local vegetarian dish (which we all enjoyed during the lunch break), and last but not least to the friendly group of participants.