

# International Journal of Education & the Arts

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<http://www.ijea.org/>

ISSN: 1529-8094

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Volume 15 Number 2

April 19, 2014

## Recycling Material Culture: Environmentalism, Free Art Supplies, and the Artsjunktion

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Citation: Garnet, D. (2014). Recycling material culture: Environmentalism, free art supplies, and Artsjunktion. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 15(2). Retrieved from <http://www.ijea.org/v15n2/>.

### Abstract

Sometimes the small initiatives that school boards undertake can create a major and lasting difference in the learning opportunities offered in the classroom. Almost always these initiatives are championed by an individual or team whose efforts determine their success or failure. The following historical account will highlight one successful initiative by a school board and the champion who maintains its success. The Artsjunktion is a space allocated by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) for businesses, organizations and individuals to donate their ‘stuff’ to be used in all areas of the arts curriculum. This paper will touch on budgetary concerns, arts leadership and environmental impacts, but most importantly this history will be a multi-layered reconstruction of archival research, oral history, and material culture.

“...they do some amazing things with stuff! Just take a jump from what it is to what it *can be*. And beyond.”

-Eileen Orr.

Like most art educators I am confronted every year with the harsh reality that my department budget directly affects the learning opportunities in my classroom. Art supplies are necessary to produce artwork and the more specialized the assignment, the more expensive the supplies are. Small art budgets directly hinder both teachers' heuristic abilities and students' access to a well-rounded visual art education. Arts budgets are constantly squeezed as provinces and boards of education download the debt onto the teachers, and eventually onto the students themselves. Many teachers will say that they work around the budget by doing some of their own hunting and gathering at various places including garage sales and flea markets; some are lucky enough to receive a variety of donations. Personally, I know teachers who fundraise and use their own money to make new and exciting experiences happen in the classroom. Art teachers are admirable and uniquely known for the personal time and funds they often contribute, but this speaks to a broader problem in the field of art education. While the 'hustle' may be personally satisfying, there are better ways for art teachers to use their resources and time.

The following account will investigate one small school board initiative that has had a major effect on the teachers and students who have benefited from it, and on the opportunities offered in the art classroom for over 30 years since its inception. The Artsjunktion is a free service located in the downtown core of Toronto that accepts, sorts, and distributes all forms of material culture, providing an environmentally friendly source for art materials. The donated materials and supplies are used by educational and creative programs within the Toronto District School Board, in classrooms, school-wide activities, curriculum projects, daycare and parenting centers, and concurrent after school and seniors' programs.

A multiple methods qualitative methodology (Creswell, 2009) based on case study (Eisenhardt, 2002), document analysis (McCulloch, 2004; Bowen, 2009), and narrative research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) has been adopted in order to generate a history of the Artsjunktion initiative. Here I draw on oral histories to verify and expand on archival data I have collected and a material cultural analysis of photographs, internal memos, newspaper and newsletter articles. Triangulating the historical dimensions of archives, material culture and oral history will permit me to weave a thick account (Stake, 1995; Eisner, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998) to inspire teachers and other boards of education to adopt similar initiatives. Utilizing archives (Morris & Raunft, 1995; Kirsch & Rohan, 2008; Steedman, 2001) provides primary sources which link material culture and both written and oral histories. Material culture (Margolis & Pauwels, 2011; Tilley, 1990; Grosvenor, 2007; Prosser, 1998) opens the researcher's senses, empathy and imagination using artifacts

(Knappett, 2005) to develop the connections between written and oral sources. A recorded oral history (Telles, 2000; Rousmaniere, 2001; Martin, 2012; Kridel, 1998) from Eileen Orr and two supplementary interviews with past administrators provide first-person accounts which interweave various influences and stories together, reconstructing the history of the Artsjunktion and the reasons for its continued success.



Figure 1. Artsjunktion 30 year anniversary poster.

Recognizing that the creation of history is a delicate balance between the objective and subjective (Munslow, 2010) I will ground my research in philosophy looking specifically at archives, history and memory. My research will take the form of a new kind of history (Jenkins, 1996; Ankersmit & Kellner, 1995) that experiments in historical narrative (Simon, 1997) to reconstruct the Artsjunktion's past through a holistic filter of the authors' own experiences. This interrelatedness of archive, narratives (oral and written), material culture and the perspective and lived experience of the researcher creates a dynamic conversation, exploring the concepts of memory and truth (Pinar, 1995). History can be written in a narrative style and still answer the difficult epistemological and methodological questions of

attaining solid historical knowledge (Tosh & Lang 2009; Danto, 2008; Burton, 2005; Collingwood, 1961). As Tuchman (1981) argues, historians must also be artists, and creative writers (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) who keep the story moving and maintain the reader's interest in a plot where the outcome is usually known. As an artist, teacher and researcher I adopt this approach to historical writing because it provides connection, a sense of empathy, or even an aesthetic emotion that captivates imagination and possibly imparts enthusiasm and enjoyment. Interweaving my story as a consumer of the Artsjunktion, acquaintance of Eileen Orr, an art educator at Central Technical School's Art Centre in Toronto, and a PhD candidate I hope to start a version of history that freely provides links to future histories and directions wherever they may lead.

### ***An Interview with Eileen Orr***

Once a month I make time after teaching my classes to take a trip to the Artsjunktion at Old Orchard Elementary public school, located in downtown Toronto. I park my car in the very narrow parking lot and walk down a steep concrete ramp toward a large blue basement door. As I push open the door, chimes are set off and a minute or two later I'll hear a bellowing 'hello' coming from a distant corner or hidden room. I walked down another ramp leading into the heart of the school's basement. Along the ramp is a conveyer belt where new things are inspected and sorted. I always let my eyes wander around the walls covered in student art and the shelving spaces filled with new stuff, replenished every week. The smells of old magazines, children's toys, a dusty school basement, fabric and carpet samples, costumes, and a variety of papers and plastics combine to give the Artsjunktion a unique and memorable scent. At the landing of the ramp there is a logbook on a table and every visitor must fill in their name, school and area in the city. On a recent visit, I signed into the logbook and began, out of habit, to peruse the current selection of materials, but today my mission was a different one. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Eileen come out of one of her "secret storage rooms" to meet me. A few weeks prior to my visit I had asked Eileen if I could interview her about her employment with the TDSB, the history of the Artsjunktion and success as an arts-based resource centre. She agreed to the interview, so today instead of filling some boxes with free materials to take away, I brought with me an audio recorder, a note pad, and a set of questions.



Figure 2. Eileen Orr sorting art materials at the Artsjunktion

Accessing Eileen’s office is usually a bit of an obstacle course, situated as it is in a tiny walkway, perpetually lined with various materials. We entered her office and I was immediately struck by the organized chaos of her work area, which was filled with papers, a computer, student art, pictures of her family and friends, scrapbooks, and thank-you cards. The majority of floor space was given over to stuff—mostly specially requested materials waiting to be picked up. There was some furniture—chairs and a coffee table—but all of it was repurposed to serve as storage space. Eileen took a moment to unload a chair full of papers by her desk so that I could sit. As I was setting up my equipment I was not surprised to see that she was ready for the interview, holding a large coffee in one hand and her notes from the questions I had sent her in advance in the other.

Eileen Orr is a practicing artist, specializing in mono printing and photography. When asked how she first became involved with the Artsjunktion, she recounted a story: In the early 1990’s, Eileen shared a studio space in downtown Toronto with her friend Marie Torres. Both using a variety of materials in their work, the two artists constantly looked for giveaways, as well as odd and ends from places like upholstery and paper shops. By chance, Marie’s partner, Don Redekop had a connection to an architecture firm that went out of business and “abandoned everything.” Eileen and Marie decided to take a road trip across the city to gather what they could in Eileen’s little Mazda GLC. “There were tons of wallpaper books,” she recalls. “So I mean, we took what we could use for our artwork, but the wallpaper books bothered me, because I *knew* someone could use them.” Days later Eileen caught a snippet of

a CBC radio program promoting the Artsjunktion and realized that they would probably want the books. After calling a few school boards Eileen found the contact of the Artsjunktion and spoke to Jane Bonnell who ran the program. At the time there was no remaining budget and no truck to pick up the materials, but Jane was very grateful for the offer. Eileen wasn't deterred and decided to make three separate trips to fill her little car with wallpaper books and drop them at the Artsjunktion. Over the next few years Eileen continued to bring materials to the Artsjunktion and built a friendship with Jane, who was also a practicing artist. When, early in 1995, Jane decided to move North at the end of the school year, she suggested that Eileen consider applying for the position. Eileen knew what the job entailed and was very interested in taking over Jane's role. Through a mix of recommendations and serendipitous timing, Eileen took over the position as director of the Artsjunktion in September 1995.

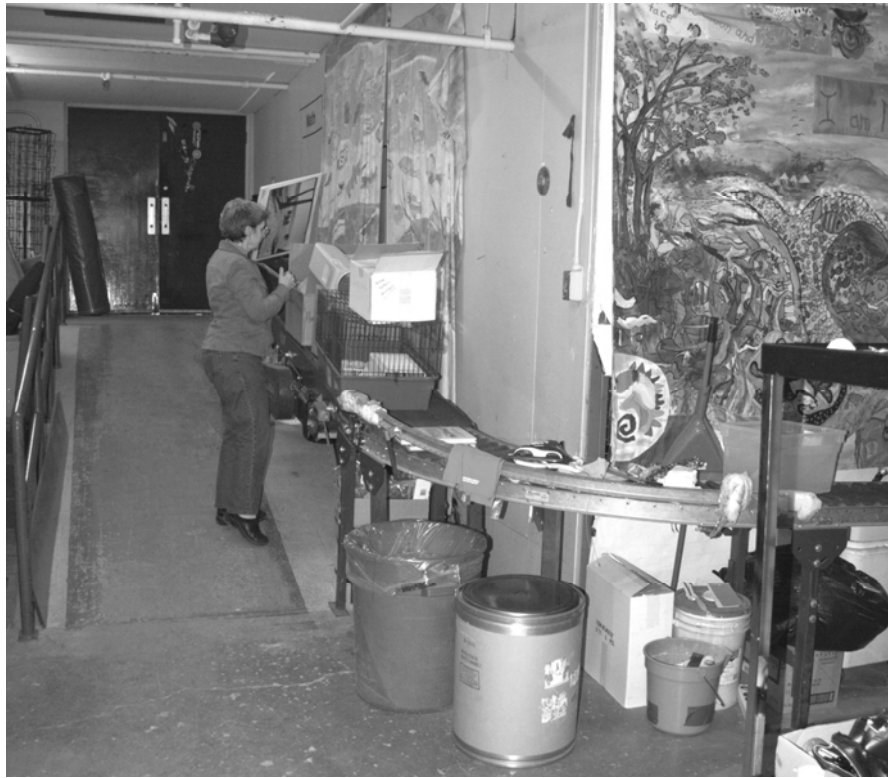


Figure 3. Donations need to be checked “you never know what you might find.”

A few minutes after I started recording our interview Eileen had to both assist some visitors with questions and take a phone call from one of her suppliers, allowing me to see firsthand the delicate balancing act that is required to keep the program running smoothly. When she was finished talking on the phone, our conversation naturally veered into questions about how the Artsjunktion runs. Eileen stressed the importance of having connections in place prior to assuming her position as director. In previous years Jane had developed a small base of

companies that donated stuff, but Eileen was ready to expand and improve on this network of suppliers. “You’ve got to hustle your butt to get stuff in here—”, she says, “you really do.” Eileen’s little black book now holds hundreds of contacts from the relationships built over the last 18 years. During our interview Eileen made it clear that these community relationships were absolutely key in sustaining growth. “Twice a year I send out 80 to 100 cards—I make cards, that’s my thing.” These personalized cards include notes thanking the donors for whatever items were given and, if possible, notes and pictures about what the teachers and students did with the materials. “And then I just say, you know, it’s really appreciated by our teachers and students, wishing you all the best for the New Year. I don’t ask for more stuff, and my intention is never to get more stuff—it’s just to keep that connection.” Suppliers for the Artsjunktion include the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), picture frame shops, the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO), movie prop companies, plumbing supply companies, H&M, private donations, and even professional organizers, who drop off stuff from their clients. Eileen encourages teachers to send her pictures of student work created with Artsjunktion supplies. “If they send me a picture of materials that they’ve used, and I know, I can tell which company it’s from—then I forward the email on to the company; they really appreciate that.”



Figure 4. A variety of materials are constantly replenished every week.

### ***A History Pieced Together***

Most of my interview with Eileen focused on her history with the Artsjunktion and the roles she plays in its success but my last few questions centered on the creation of the program and the material culture which documented its existence. Reaching behind her, Eileen grabbed a file folder and passed it to me. I opened the folder to find the Artsjunktion's archive, which Eileen had compiled and agreed to share in reconstructing its history. As I looked through the archive Eileen was more than happy to weave a story between the photos, internal memos, and news articles. Other sources I used to reconstruct the Artsjunktion's history include Tony Caputo a former TDSB visual art instructional leader and Ceta Ramkhalawansingh, president of the Learnxs Foundation.

In late 1979, Gaetana Robinson was one of two consultants in the Visual Art Department. On a personal trip to Boston she stopped to visit the Boston Children's Museum where she came across the "RECYCLING" area. The space was used to sell large packages of found materials for kids and teachers to create artwork. When Gaetana came back to Toronto, she had this vision of opening up a recycling area where teachers could go and avail themselves of found materials (T. Caputo, personal communication, February 20, 2012). Initial "core support" provided by the Learnxs Foundation (Sisler, 1993: 252) brought Gaetana's idea to life. The Learnxs Foundation is a non-profit community organization that was established to provide a mechanism for experimental and innovative community educational programs to be operated in co-operation with the Toronto Board of Education. The name "Learnxs" is a short form of "learning exchange system," which describes the philosophy behind the support provided by the foundation for various activities (C. Ramkhalawansingh, personal communication, February 7, 2012). The model developed for Learnxs of a small independent arms-length organization involving key players within the educational system as well as community representation has been useful in the past and will continue to be useful in the future. Such an organization has the flexibility to experiment and to innovate without involving the whole educational system, an attribute that is especially attractive when educational finances are tight (C. Ramkhalawansingh, personal communication, February 7, 2012). When successful, the experimental directions and innovative programs can be co-opted by the broader system.

In September 1980 the first Artsjunktion was opened in the basement of Queen Alexandria middle school located at Dundas and Broadview in Toronto. The very tiny room in the basement of the school was filled by Gaetana and organizers from Learnxs; soon after, Sandra Berkowitz was hired as Artsjunktion's inaugural director. The challenge from the beginning was being bounced from location to location, as schools reclaimed their previously unneeded spaces. From the basement of Queen Alexandria school, Artsjunktion relocated to an alternative school called "Contact School" which was in an old supermarket warehouse in the east end. It was in this location that Jane Bonnell was hired as director, and she oversaw its



final move to Old Orchard Elementary School, where it has currently run for over fifteen years. At the time, Jane was able to secure this location because of declining enrolment, which meant a surplus of available space in the school (T. Caputo, personal communication, February 20, 2012). The Artsjunktion maintained the whole basement of Old Orchard up until a few years ago when a steel pan music initiative reclaimed half the space. Currently, the TDSB initiative has received funding for the 2014/2015 school year, but with deep cuts in the education system due to school board debt, now more than ever it is necessary to recognize how important this program is for hundreds of teachers and their students.

### ***Why Is It Working?***

Demand is constantly rising—in the form of both a steady increase in visitor numbers and continual pressure from the board for clear results to justify the continued funding of the Artsjunktion initiative. Data collected and analyzed from the Artsjunktion logbook and other published sources show that from 1989 to 2004 there were between 3000 and 3500 visitors per year, but for the last four years, visits have been hovering around 5000. “It’s just growing in leaps and bounds, because there’s a need, explains Eileen. “And also, it just saves on teacher’s budgets. They can spend money on other things if they get lots of free decent material from here.” Eileen works 25 hours a week. “Two days I’m open, one day I’m schlepping stuff in. I do my phone calls and emails in my studio, on my time.” Her job also takes her out into the community:

I go out at least a dozen times a year—some years more, some years not quite as many. I go to visit companies, especially when it’s a new company that’s just a new connection. Sometimes they want me to come, sometimes they don’t care. And I have a sense of what the materials are, whether we can use them or not, without going. But if they want a visit, I’ll visit. And sometimes it just cements a relationship. And often, they’ll be offering me foam core, but they also have off-cuts of plexi, and cardboard tubes, and all kinds of other things that they haven’t thought of, that I don’t know that they have. If I do a walk-around, I’ll see ... “Oh look at this! What about this?” And, it can bring a whole new dimension to what they’re offering us. Because sometimes, they don’t understand that, say, thousands of little colored tab things are wonderful for an art project, or for counters for little kids.

The Artsjunktion’s budget hovers between 7,000 and 9,000 dollars per year. That’s not a big budget for operation, considering the yearly average of 5000 visitors. It works out to about \$1.50 a person. Very few donors deliver and it can be problematic to work around the schedules of the few companies that do. Almost all of the budget goes to truck pick-ups and deliveries. Once the skids of stuff are dropped off, Eileen and her team of volunteers sort and

organize. “We’ll get a mix of weird things, but oh it’s so fun sorting them, because they’re like treasure boxes. You never know exactly what’s going to be in them! And—*you never know what’s going to be in them*. It can go either way! They’re fun though.”

Eileen’s enthusiasm and passion for her job is obvious—my interview confirms this, as do informal discussions with other art educators, and the many trips I’ve taken to the Artsjunktion over my nine years as an art educator with the TDSB. Being an artist herself “brings another level to it,” she says—she relishes being able to provide a great resource for teachers to think differently about the uses of material culture—“it’s a big benefit, to have her in that position” (T. Caputo, personal communication, February 20, 2012). The increase in visitors and willing contributors is a clear result of Eileen’s efforts to reach out to the community, as well as of a collective understanding by business and industry to move toward finding creative environmental solutions for the waste that is generated in the course of operations.

### ***Environmentalism and Artsjunktion***

Another important element of the Artsjunktion’s success has to do with its environmental mandate—to reuse and recycle, diverting usable materials from the waste stream, while also putting a pedagogy of sustainability into action. Every year businesses, organizations and individuals throw away millions of dollars worth of stuff that could be transformed into usable materials for school board art programs. Much of this waste can be attributed to laziness, lack of resources and loss of imagination. “I think maybe a lot of people at upper levels just don’t understand the whole ‘art-whatever,’” laments Eileen. She is probably right, but what companies large and small do understand is the concept of environmentalism. Articles found in Ontario recycling industry newsletters highlight the Artsjunktion as “practicing the fine art of recycling” (Glenn, 1994, p. 1), and diverting at least a ton of waste per week from landfill (McGinnis, 1990).



Figure 5. Kelly Beaulieu (Teacher) - Mannequins from H&M and donated fabric.

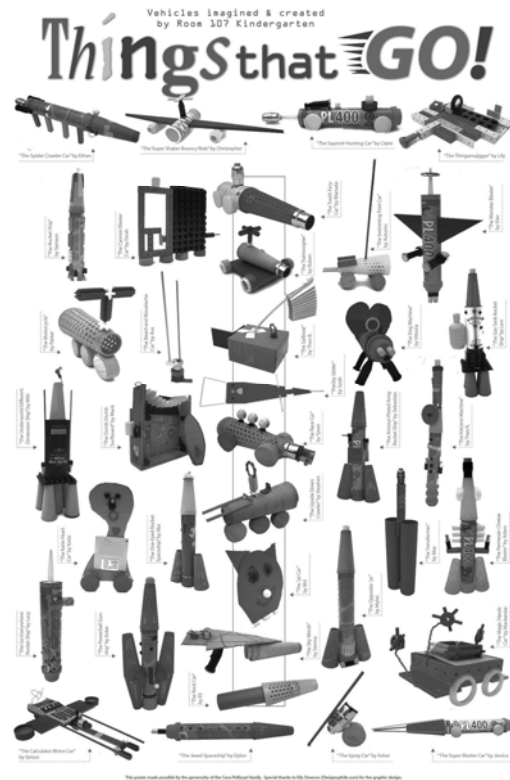


Figure 6. Simon Ives (Teacher) - Cones from Parkhurst Knitting Mills

Environmental art education theory has also gained popularity over the last twenty years. Eco-art education integrates art education with environmental education as a means of developing awareness of and engagement with concepts such as interdependence, biodiversity, conservation, restoration, and sustainability (Inwood, 2010). Art educators like Krug (2003), Anderson & Milbrandt (2004), Gablik (1991), and Garoian (1998) recommend a pedagogy that is community-based, interdisciplinary, experiential, interactive, dialogic, ideologically aware, and built on the values of empathy, sustainability, and respect for the environment. Discussions of the delivery of eco-art education have prefigured and integrated various trends in contemporary art education, and provided a pedagogy on which any general art program can be successfully based (Inwood, 2010). The creation of the Artsjunktion and other programs like it serve as a vital and integral part of implementing an eco-art curriculum. For example, Graham (2007), using a critical place-based pedagogy, creates a rigorous theoretical framework that combines the ecological focus of place-based education with the social focus of critical theory (Gruenewald, 2003). For Graham, when “teaching becomes responsive to ecology and local culture,” then “artmaking becomes socially aware, reflective, and

transformational” (Graham, 2007, p. 375). The Artsjunktion provides materials from local businesses and individuals adding to the depth and effect of a place-based education.



Figure 7. David Charles (Teacher)- Donated movie costumes and props.

The Artsjunktion is not totally unique in its environmental mission. Eileen also has a big part in “The Creative Zone,” which is similar to the Artsjunktion and services the Peel District School Board located west of Toronto. As well, I have identified four other sites that offer similar services. In Missouri, the Springfield Public School’s “etc. Center” offers supplies for free and allows outside school boards to buy access to the resources (Brown, 1996). New York’s “Materials for the Arts,” created in 1978 by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, provides thousands of arts and cultural organizations, public schools, and community arts programs with the supplies they need to run and expand their programs. In the process, hundreds of tons of materials are removed from the waste stream every year and kept out of landfills (Materials for the Arts, 2012). Edmonton’s “Reuse Centre” and the Boston Children’s Museum’s “Recycle Shop” collect industrial castoffs and charge users a per bag fee. These types of arts recycling centers show that there is a growing need and desire to use recycled materials, creating a richer educational experience and providing businesses and individuals with simple and efficient ways to enhance the cultural life of their city.



Figure 8. Susan Blerish (Teacher) - Donated Fabrics and Paint.

Combining recorded accounts, archival research, material culture and the unique multi-focal lens of the researcher, I have attempted to inspire and create a rich account of this unique art education resource. The history of the Artsjunktion not only showcases art education leadership and dedication, it also presents a cost-effective, realistic and common-sense school board program that has made and continues to make a huge difference in the scope of educational opportunities offered in the art classroom for TDSB students. The environmental impact the Artsjunktion has made to the city of Toronto and to the eco-consciousness of its users should stand as a model for school boards everywhere.



Figure 9.

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