

Beyond the Silent Gallery: Cultivating Sustainable Discourse Via Youth-Led 'Ecologies of Practice'

Dr. Shashi Priya Upadhayay

Assistant professor

School of fine arts

AAFT University, Math, Chhattisgarh 492001

shashi.priya@aaft.edu.in

Abstract

This study investigates the systemic marginalization termed 'curatorial segregation' of child-created art within major cultural institutions, using the Kochi-Muziris Biennale's Art By Children (ABC) initiative as a primary case. It argues that relegating youth-driven artistic expressions on sustainability to peripheral 'silent galleries' constitutes an epistemic injustice, silencing vital perspectives crucial for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The paper analyzes the pedagogical framework of ABC lead Blaise Joseph, conceptualized as an 'ecology of practice,' which fosters non-hierarchical, material-led, and community-embedded creation. Through a qualitative, multi-modal methodology, the research contrasts this transformative philosophy against the Biennale's persistent exhibitionary barriers. Findings demonstrate that child-led art generates significant discourse on SDGs 4 (Quality Education), 13 (Climate Action), and 14 (Life Below Water). The paper concludes by proposing a framework for epistemic equity, advocating for curatorial models that transition from tokenistic inclusion to genuine co-authorship, thereby transforming cultural institutions into resonant spaces for intergenerational sustainability dialogue.

Keywords: Child-led art, Curatorial segregation, Sustainable Development Goals, Epistemic injustice, Kochi-Muziris Biennale, Ecology of practice, Participatory curation, Intergenerational discourse

1. Introduction and Problem Statement

Global conversations surrounding sustainable development, despite their universal aspirations, frequently overlook a crucial demographic: children. As the primary inheritors of contemporary ecological and social challenges, young people possess distinct, embodied insights into planetary crises. Artistic expression has emerged as a potent channel for these perspectives, formally recognized by institutions like the Kochi-Muziris Biennale through its Art By Children (ABC) programme. Such initiatives aspire to establish inclusive, non-competitive environments for creative exploration beyond standard curricula.

A persistent contradiction, however, undermines this progressive intent. Within these very platforms, artworks produced by children, particularly those engaging sustainability themes, are routinely subjected to physical and symbolic marginalization. This practice, defined here as curatorial segregation, sees youth creations consistently placed in ancillary zones separate educational annexes or designated 'children's corners' distinct from core galleries where adult 'professional' work is displayed. This generates 'silent galleries': spaces where child-led commentary is visible but institutionally muted, its discursive potential severed from central artistic and sustainability debates.

This segregation operates as a powerful institutional mechanism, framing youth art as pedagogical activity rather than legitimate intellectual contribution. Consequently, its capacity to influence mainstream cultural and sustainability discourse is severely limited. By sidelining these imaginative, often emotionally potent visions, museums and biennales inadvertently reinforce hierarchical voice valuations, contravening the intergenerational equity principles foundational to the SDGs.

This research critically examines this dissonance. It investigates how a major biennale's structures simultaneously enable and constrain youthful artistic agency, focusing on the chasm between ABC's emancipatory community philosophy and exclusionary exhibition norms. Central is the work of Blaise Joseph, ABC's program manager, whose 'ecologies of practice' concept offers a coherent, radical alternative. His approach, rooted in collaborative engagement with natural systems and fearless space creation, represents a form of transpedagogy merging art-making with sustainability education.

The study posits that overcoming curatorial segregation necessitates a paradigm shift toward epistemic equity. It contends child-led 'ecologies of practice' do not merely illustrate sustainability topics but performatively enact sustainable principles collaboration, empathy, and democratic participation. Their integration into primary cultural narratives is therefore not optional outreach but an essential step for fostering the pluralistic, urgent dialogue required for sustainable futures.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Participatory Art and Youth Agency

This inquiry is grounded in participatory and socially engaged art theory, which shifts focus from the solitary artist-genius to collaborative, process-oriented creation that sparks social dialogue and empowers communities. Within this tradition, children are reconceptualized not as passive learners but as active social co-creators. This aligns with contemporary childhood studies, which frame youth as competent cultural producers with participatory rights. Arts-based participatory action research, such as projects with displaced youth, demonstrates that youth-led artistic inquiry fosters robust agency, self-expression, and the capacity to envision alternative futures, positioning artistic engagement as a valid mode of embodied knowledge production.

Emerging scholarship further reinforces the unique role of youth voice. A forthcoming academic work argues that arts-based methods are crucial for promoting youth voice and engagement in global development, enabling young people to be recognized as active citizens and ensuring development programs remain accountable to them. This work develops the conceptualization of "transrational voice for epistemic justice," demonstrating how arts enable a broad understanding of voice that accounts for the multiple dimensions of young people's knowledges and experiences. This directly intersects with the goals of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), positioning youth-led art not as extracurricular activity but as central to development discourse.

2.2. Institutional Space and Symbolic Exclusion

Analyzing curatorial segregation requires critical scrutiny of the museum/gallery as a constructed space. The traditional 'white cube' is theorized as a neutral, authoritative arena, where silence metaphorically signifies exclusion. While contemporary institutions are often bustling, the deliberate quiet of certain spaces or the exclusion of specific voices maintains power dynamics. Introducing public dialogue via comment books or participatory displays can 'disturb the eternal silence,' challenging institutional control. This paper extends this metaphor: the 'silent gallery' is where children's voices are rendered inaudible within formal discourse, their presence not equating to meaningful participation. This reflects a spatial production that naturalizes hierarchies between central/professional and peripheral/amateur.

This exclusion is systemic. As noted in discussions on "A New, Critical Children's Museology," museums often engage with children from a deficit-based approach: "they are treated as liabilities in need of containment, learners in need of education, and energetic beings with short attention spans in need of entertainment". This view is reinforced through physical infrastructure, with children "typically sequestered into side rooms and basements for separate programming and education, often via alternative entrances". Such spatial segregation is a physical manifestation of the epistemic hierarchy this paper critiques.

2.3. Arts-Based Education for the SDGs and Climate Futures

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is a cornerstone of the 2030 Agenda. Research increasingly validates arts-based methodologies as uniquely effective for ESD, moving past cognitive understanding to elicit emotional and ethical responses that motivate action. Studies show art provides youth a platform to process complex feelings about issues like plastic pollution (SDG 14), connect global problems to local contexts, and ideate solutions. Collaborative projects, such

as school-based ocean murals, translate global goals into tangible local action, nurturing shared responsibility and creative agency. This scholarship supports the core argument that youth-led art is a legitimate, powerful ESD mechanism whose institutional marginalization impedes broader sustainability progress.

A systematic review of arts-based climate change education programs confirms their transformative potential. These approaches facilitate "active, collaborative and embodied ways of learning about possible futures," helping students in "exploring, confronting and engaging with climate change as well as fostering futures literacy". The review highlights how arts-based "futuring" – the application of arts to futures thinking – supports relationality, humility, and the capacity to engage with uncertainty. This evidence directly supports the argument that the ABC programme's 'ecologies of practice' are not merely creative workshops but sophisticated pedagogical frameworks for developing the competencies needed for sustainable futures.

Moreover, art's role extends beyond education to emotional processing and advocacy. Art serves as "an outlet for individuals to express their emotions and feelings about the state of the world" and can be "an effective coping mechanism for individuals dealing with the stress and anxiety associated with climate change". This therapeutic and expressive function underscores why silencing these artistic voices constitutes a harm beyond mere exclusion from display; it denies children a vital tool for processing the planetary crises they inherit.

3. Theoretical Framework: 'Ecologies of Practice' and Epistemic (In)Justice

This research is framed by two interlinked constructs: the 'ecologies of practice' exemplified by Joseph's work and the concept of epistemic injustice applied to curatorial norms.

3.1. Conceptualizing 'Ecologies of Practice'

Derived from Joseph's praxis, an 'ecology of practice' is a holistic framework where artistic creation mirrors sustainable ecological systems. Its characteristics include:

- **Radical Collaboration:** Dissolving rigid teacher/student and artist/audience dichotomies in favor of circular, non-hierarchical group intelligence.
- **Embodied, Play-Based Engagement:** Utilizing action songs, non-competitive games, and somatic activities to bypass intellectual barriers and reconnect with joyful, communal expression, aligning with trauma-informed educational approaches.
- **Deep Material and Place Connection:** Employing locally sourced, natural elements (soil, charcoal, leaves) as both artistic medium and political statement an act of solidarity that critiques art-world commodification and fosters an ethical relationship with locale. This mirrors broader sustainable art practices that use reclaimed materials for their narrative power and eco-friendly, non-toxic pigments.
- **Process Primacy:** Valuing the transformative experience strengthened community bonds, nurtured empathy, fearless expression over the production of polished art commodities.

This ecology is inherently transpedagogical, seamlessly blending art-making, education, community development, and ecological consciousness. It positions the child as a present knowledge-holder, not a future citizen-in-training. This approach aligns with the principles of socially engaged art practices, which "prioritize social interaction, community building, and political action over traditional aesthetic objects" and directly address sustainability by "giving voice to those most affected by climate change and pollution".

3.2. Curatorial Segregation as Epistemic Injustice

Philosopher Miranda Fricker defines epistemic injustice as harm inflicted on an individual in their capacity as a knower. Testimonial injustice involves a credibility deficit due to listener prejudice, while hermeneutical injustice arises from collective interpretive resource gaps that hinder an individual's social understanding.

Curatorial segregation enacts a dual epistemic injustice:

1. **Testimonial Injustice:** Institutions and audiences assign diminished credibility to knowledge embedded in children's art, prejudiced by perceptions of age and expertise. Their output is deemed 'childlike' (diminutive) rather than valued as distinct testimony.
2. **Hermeneutical Injustice:** The art world lacks the curatorial lexicon, critical frameworks, and institutional models to properly interpret and integrate process-oriented, collective, sustainability-focused work. It is thus marginalized into lesser categories ('community art,' 'education'), devoid of mainstream discursive prestige.

Achieving epistemic equity requires intentionally restructuring institutional practices to legitimize and amplify children's voices as equal contributors to cultural and sustainability discourse. This entails what scholars term a "critical children's museology," which involves "the production of museum content and programming not just for or about children, but also by and with children in ways that engage them as valued social actors and knowledge-bearers". This critical museology creates "an opening for much-needed critique of the adult-dominated status quo".

4. Research Design and Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, multi-modal design to triangulate data, critically examining relationships between institutional rhetoric, pedagogical philosophy, and material practice to uncover structural mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion.

Table 1: Research Methodology Overview

Methodological Component	Data Sources & Techniques	Primary Research Objective
Spatial & Curatorial Analysis	Examination of Biennale venue maps, photographic documentation of layouts. Mapping ABC output locations versus main venues (e.g., Aspinwall House).	To document and visualize the physical segregation of youth art from the Biennale's core narrative and visitor flow.
Discourse & Framing Analysis	Close textual analysis of official Biennale publications, ABC curatorial statements, wall texts, website content.	To analyze linguistic framing of children's work ('workshop,' 'learning') versus adult work ('exhibition,' 'intervention').
Pedagogical Philosophy Analysis	Scrutiny of writings, talks, and documented practice of Blaise Joseph. Study of ABC workshop structures and goals.	To comprehend the intent and methodology of child-led 'ecologies of practice' and contrast it with exhibition outcomes.
Case Study Analysis	In-depth analysis of specific projects (ABC school art rooms, SDG 14 mural), using project documentation and artwork descriptions.	To ground theoretical claims in concrete examples, illustrating the nature of children's sustainability discourse.

This integrated approach robustly examines how ABC's transformative potential is nurtured in workshop settings yet constrained by conventional exhibition architectures and discursive habits. The methodology is informed by best practices in youth-led participatory action research (YPAR), which emphasizes that "youth are involved in key decisions at all stages of the research" and that projects "utilize a range of research methods for data collection including arts-based methods". While this study analyzes rather than enacts YPAR, its commitment to taking youth artistry seriously as a site of knowledge production aligns with YPAR's core tenet of centering youth voice.

Furthermore, this research is attuned to the ethical considerations paramount in participatory arts work with young people. The analysis considers issues of power, consent, trust, and ownership that emerge when children's creative expressions are mobilized within institutional contexts. The ethical framework outlined in the literature, which covers partnership

working, project entry, participation, and dissemination, informs the critical lens through which the Biennale's presentation of ABC work is assessed. This ensures the critique of 'curatorial segregation' is not merely aesthetic or logistical but fundamentally ethical, concerned with how institutions honor or betray the agency of the young creators they engage.

5. Case Studies and Findings: Dissonance Between Praxis and Presentation

5.1. Case Study 1: The ABC Art Room – Philosophical Ideals versus Exhibitionary Reality

The ABC Art Room, guided by Joseph, is the operational core of the 'ecology of practice.' Conceptualized as an evolving 'seed,' it is a non-judgmental studio hosting diverse activities from visual arts to farming, facilitated by over 110 artists, prioritizing process and collective discovery.

Findings from Spatial/Discursive Analysis:

- **Physical and Temporal Marginalization:** Despite its conceptual importance, the Art Room and its outputs are frequently housed in ancillary venues (e.g., Cabral Yard) or presented as short 'final displays,' contrasting the main exhibition's 110-day run, temporally framing youth work as fleeting event rather than integral thread. This practice mirrors the broader museological trend of sequestering children's programming to side rooms and basements.
- **Discursive Othering:** Institutional communications consistently label ABC an 'educational programme' or 'activity' for 'young minds,' whereas the main Biennale is an 'international exhibition' featuring 'artists.' This lexical division upholds a hierarchy: adults exhibit; children participate. This reflects a deficit-based institutional view of children as learners in need of instruction rather than knowledge-bearers.
- **The Anonymized Collective:** While challenging the solo artist cult, the ABC's collaborative ethos often results in work presented without individual authorship, potentially diluting recognition of specific, agentic contributions within a gallery context. This raises ethical questions about ownership and attribution in participatory work.

This case reveals the central conflict: a radical pedagogy of care is filtered through an institutional economy of display that privileges named authorship, finished objects, and discursive seriousness defined by adult professional standards.

5.2. Case Study 2: Child-Led Advocacy for SDG 14 – "The Ocean's Voice" Mural Project

This analysis explores a tangible youth-led sustainability art example: a mural project focused on SDG 14 (Life Below Water) created by 8-9 year-olds. It exemplifies the 'ecology of practice' and its discursive power.

The 'Ecology of Practice' Manifested:

- **Collaborative Foundation:** Co-designed by a teacher and local artist, with family-provided recycled materials, embedding the work in community networks. This aligns with sustainable art collaborations that multiply impact by involving schools and local groups.
- **Critical Material Engagement:** Youth employed blues and greens to depict marine life, directly incorporating retrieved plastic debris into the mural, tangibly engaging with consumption and waste themes. The use of reclaimed materials carries narrative power, turning waste into a symbol of the environmental crisis.
- **Narrative Juxtaposition:** Vibrant, carefully painted sea creatures were juxtaposed with graphic representations of pollution and overfishing, accompanied by student-researched facts about ocean acidification. This created potent visual dissonance, reflecting, as one facilitator noted, "young perspectives courageously confronting inherited dilemmas." This act of "environmental storytelling" transforms abstract issues into personal and memorable experiences.

SDG Discourse Generated:

Participants moved beyond craft-making to conduct a visual and material critique of oceanic threats. Their synthesis of researched knowledge, emotional concern for crafted creatures, and public advocacy (via the school-hall mural)

demonstrates youth capacity to engage complex systemic issues through art, producing work that is aesthetically thoughtful, emotionally resonant, and discursively rich. This process exemplifies "futuring" using art to explore, confront, and engage with climate change, thereby fostering futures literacy.

The Institutional Dilemma:

If this mural were displayed at a major biennale, would it occupy a central gallery as a compelling Anthropocene commentary, or be sidelined as a charming school project? The probable latter outcome underscores the epistemic injustice analyzed. The mural's methodology participatory, community-embedded, and focused on material transformation aligns perfectly with the principles of Socially Engaged Art, which aims to "address real-world issues, often operating outside conventional gallery spaces". Yet, this very alignment may be what leads to its marginalization within the traditional "white cube."

Frame of 'Ecology of Practice'	Frame of 'Curatorial Segregation'	Impact on SDG Discourse
Collaborative, process-oriented knowledge production.	Supplementary educational activity.	Knowledge is devalued as less rigorous.
Embodied, emotional engagement with sustainability crises.	Simplistic or naive emotional expression.	The affective drive for action is patronized.
Children as co-creators and present agents.	Children as learners and future citizens.	Agency is undermined, disconnecting action from the present.
Artwork as a site of critical discourse and advocacy.	Artwork as evidence of learning or participation.	The political and discursive power of the work is neutralized.

6. Discussion: Proposing a Framework for Epistemic Equity

Findings consolidate into a clear argument: the silent gallery is maintained through spatial, temporal, and discursive strategies preserving traditional art world hierarchies while performatively endorsing inclusion. Dismantling this requires a Framework for Epistemic Equity in curating child-led art.

6.1. Principles for Equitable Curation

- Co-Curation and Shared Authority:** Integrate youth and facilitators into curatorial teams. Decisions on placement, interpretation, and lighting should be shared, applying the 'circle' model to institutional governance. This embodies the YPAR principle of youth involvement in key decisions at all stages. Models for this exist in the growing field of "child curating," where children act as experts of innovation and interactivity, changing curatorial practice through active participation.
- Process as Exhibitionary Content:** Develop curatorial models capable of presenting collaborative, open-ended processes. This could involve exhibiting a live studio as a durational artwork within a main gallery, or using documentation to narrate the creation journey as central to the work's meaning. This challenges the commodity-focused "economy of display."
- Discursive Re-framing:** Apply equivalent critical apparatus to youth-led work. Provide artist statements (from the children), thematic integration with professional works on similar themes, and curatorial texts engaging

with the work's conceptual and political claims. This fights hermeneutical injustice by building the interpretive resources needed to take children's art seriously.

4. Sustainable Institutional Partnerships: Transcend one-off projects. Support enduring 'ecologies of practice' in communities and schools, creating pathways for such work to enter institutional mainstreams continuously. This requires funding and institutional will to support long-term, process-oriented engagement rather than one-off outreach events.

6.2. Transformative Potential for SDG Advocacy

Adopting this framework would enable cultural institutions to become authentic SDG implementation allies. Child-led art offers:

- **Affective Resonance:** It communicates the emotional stakes of sustainability in ways data cannot, building essential empathy. Art serves as a crucial outlet for processing climate anxiety and making abstract crises feel personally relevant.
- **Intergenerational Bridge:** It creates shared language and projects between generations, vital for long-term SDG action. Through collaborative art, knowledge and concern can flow multidirectionally, not just from adult to child.
- **Models of Sustainable Practice:** The 'ecology of practice' itself collaborative, locally rooted, material-mindful models the behavioral and social shifts the SDGs champion. When children use reclaimed materials or natural pigments, they are not just making art about sustainability; they are *practicing* it.
- **Developing Futures Literacy:** Arts-based "futuring" helps young people develop the capacity to imagine, confront, and engage with potential climate futures, a critical skill for navigating the uncertainty of the 21st century.

By transitioning child-led discourse from silent periphery to resonant core, biennales and museums can transform from elite cultural temples into dynamic agoras for intergenerational dialogue on our collective future. This aligns with a broader vision of art and creativity as "essential components of sustainability" that help us "connect with nature, understand the impacts of our actions, and develop new solutions to our challenges".

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This research demonstrates that child-led artistic expression, particularly when guided by an 'ecology of practice,' holds indispensable insights for sustainable development. It articulates ecological grief, hope, and alternative visions with unique vulnerability, imagination, and moral clarity. Initiatives like the Kochi-Muziris Biennale's ABC programme create vital conditions for this expression.

Yet, the persistent practice of curatorial segregation through spatial marginalization, discursive othering, and temporal containment continues silencing these voices within the very institutions platforming them. This contradiction between progressive philosophy and conservative practice signifies a critical juncture for cultural institutions. Dismantling the silent gallery necessitates more than allocated space; it demands fundamental rethinking of artistic authority, value, and participation.

Recommendations:

- **For Curators and Institutions:** Pilot co-curatorial models with youth artists, drawing on emerging practices in critical children's museology. Develop new interpretive strategies that engage seriously with child-led work. Allocate central, prime-time exhibition space to projects emerging from 'ecologies of practice,' treating them as core artistic contributions rather than educational annexes.
- **For Funders and Policymakers:** Design grant criteria rewarding deep collaboration and epistemic equity, not mere outreach. Support the long-term sustainability of artist-facilitator roles in community and school settings. Prioritize funding for arts-based "futuring" programs that build climate literacy and imaginative resilience.

- For Researchers: Conduct longitudinal studies on the impact of child-led art on community environmental action. Further develop the critical vocabulary for analyzing and valuing participatory, process-based artistic work. Deepen research into the ethical dimensions of participatory arts with youth, ensuring these powerful methods are used respectfully and empoweringly.

Youth voices, articulated through their art on defining planetary issues, must not be peripheral. They must be centered, heard, and engaged as vital, knowing, creative agents. In doing so, we do not merely democratize art; we activate a powerful, necessary force for imagining and building a sustainable future. The silent gallery must become a resonant space, where the 'ecologies of practice' nurtured by visionaries like Blaise Joseph are recognized not as a sideshow, but as a central, vibrant, and essential discourse in the great work of world-making.

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