

International Journal of Education & the Arts

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

ISSN: 1529-8094

Volume 23 Number 10

August 22, 2022

Engaging with Poetry on the Wall: Inviting, Seizing, Intensifying, and Transforming Literary Engagements

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Citation: Höglund, H., & Jusslin, S. (2022). Engaging with Poetry on the Wall: Inviting, seizing, intensifying, and transforming literary engagements. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 23(10). <http://doi.org/10.26209/ijea23n10>

Abstract

This article adds to the discussion of arts-based approaches to teaching poetry by exploring an example of *Poetry on the Wall* and its potential for poetry education. Poetry on the Wall intertwines literary and visual elements by materializing and visualizing poetry in a physical environment. The study centers on the poem *Reading List* created and painted as a wall mural by the artist-poet Vidha Saumya. In relation to Reading List, the produced data encompasses a dialogue between artists, researchers, and educators, as well as the researchers' and educators' embodied engagement with the poem. Theoretically guided by a performative approach, this analysis suggests that the potential of Poetry on the Wall includes inviting, seizing,

intensifying, and transforming literary engagements. Poetry on the Wall sets in motion a rethinking of poetry and where it can be found and created, contributing to the movement exploring alternative ways to reinvigorate poetry in education.

Introduction

What potential can arts-based approaches bring to poetry education? Considering that the literature on poetry in education has emphasized the need to rethink how poetry can be approached and taught in educational contexts (cf. Creely, 2019), this question has intrigued us in our scholarly work and teaching practices (e.g., Höglund, 2017; Jusslin, 2020). Arts-based approaches to teaching poetry have gained increasing attention in previous research and could bring new and creative ways to teach poetry (Jusslin & Höglund, 2021).

In this article, we add to the discussion about arts-based approaches to poetry education by exploring an example of *Poetry on the Wall* and its potential for poetry in education. We use the concept of Poetry on the Wall to refer to different ways of materializing and visualizing poetry in the physical environment, with our study focusing specifically on poetry on walls inside buildings. With the move from the page to the wall, Poetry on the Wall intertwines literary and visual elements and can bring poetry to a wider audience, often in unexpected places. Artistic projects like *Wall Poems Leiden*¹ and *Poems on the Underground*² present examples of such intertwinements, but research on their educational potential and contributions remains scarce. Moving poetry beyond the pages of a book also includes possibilities to challenge what poetry is, what counts as poetry, and what poetry can do.

This study focuses on an example of Poetry on the Wall through the poem *Reading List* (2020),³ created by the artist-poet Vidha Saumya. Painted as a temporary mural, Reading List proposes a list of 96 authors and writers from India who should be included in global reading lists, staging a dialogue with the concept of the Western canon. Considering Reading List caught our attention and coincided with our interest in exploring the potential of Poetry on the Wall, we invited Vidha and two of our colleagues in visual arts education to join us in a dialogue about the poem. As such, the guiding question for our exploration is: what kind of potential can engaging with Poetry on the Wall set in motion for poetry education?

¹ For information about Wall Poems Leiden, see: <https://muurgedichten.nl/en>

² For information about Poems on the Underground, see: <https://poetrysociety.org.uk/projects/poems-on-the-underground/>

³ A video of *Reading List* is available on the Pro Artibus Foundation's webpage: <https://proartibus.fi/en/reading-list-vidha-saumya/>



Figure 1. Photograph of Reading List (Photography: Lars Rebers)

Poetry Education with Arts-Based Approaches

In the 21st century, research on poetry in educational contexts has gained growing attention. Scholars have highlighted various challenging aspects, such as teachers feeling inexperienced as poetry readers (Certo et al., 2012; Hughes & Dymoke, 2011), students perceiving poetry as inaccessible and difficult (Dressman, 2015; Jones & Curwood, 2020), and poetry often being marginalized in school curricula (Creely, 2019). In response, Creely (2019) emphasized that teaching poetry during the last few decades has declined and often lacks a coherent pedagogical vision. Scholars have called for a reinvigoration, renewal, and rethinking of pedagogical approaches to teaching poetry, while emphasizing the need to highlight the place and role of poetry in school curricula (Creely, 2019; Dressman, 2015).

In recent literature on poetry pedagogy, scholars have emphasized the necessity of applying a broad understanding of poetry (e.g., Dymoke & Hughes, 2009; Jones & Curwood, 2020; Kovalik & Curwood, 2019). Similarly, scholars have stressed poetry's interdisciplinary character and the importance of viewing poetry in a broader cultural context that considers contemporary cultural and medial diversity (Alghadeer, 2014; Xerri, 2012). Inspired by popular culture genres, such as hip hop and spoken-word poetry, researchers have investigated how to include these cultural forms in the poetry classroom (e.g., Dymoke, 2017; Jones &

Curwood, 2020). Further, Dymoke and Hughes (2009) drew attention to poetry as “a playful, multimodal living medium rather than one which should be stranded forever on the printed page” (p. 93). Specifically, they emphasized how poetry is embedded in the rhythms of everyday life in lyrics and Tweets and how it is performed at slams and broadcast on social media platforms.

Research on arts-based approaches to teaching poetry, such as the use of visual arts, has recently gained critical momentum (see Jusslin & Höglund, 2021). An arts-based approach combines various art forms with teaching poetry. This study focuses on an arts-based approach that intertwines literary and visual elements. Previous research on this topic has mainly addressed digital composition projects (e.g., Bowmer & Curwood, 2016; Curwood & Cowell, 2011; Höglund, 2017, 2022). In reviewing empirical research on arts-based approaches to poetry teaching, we have previously argued for the need to attend to aesthetic aspects when combining poetry with visual elements (Jusslin & Höglund, 2021).

Against this background, arts-based approaches to poetry could contribute to renewing and rethinking ways of teaching poetry. Adding to this line of research, we consider the pedagogical potential of Poetry on the Wall. A performative approach guides us theoretically in our exploration of what Poetry on the Wall can produce and set in motion for poetry education.

A Performative Approach

Performativity has had different meanings since it emerged from a theoretical term used in linguistics to become a key term within artistic contexts and beyond (Arlander, 2018). We build our understanding of performativity on Barad’s (2003) notion of posthumanist performativity “that incorporate[s] important material and discursive, social and scientific, human and nonhuman, and natural and cultural factors” (p. 808). This understanding challenges representational assumptions that language alone can represent the world, aligning with an ontological turn that acknowledges that knowing is always becoming; therefore, be(com)ing/known cannot be separated (Barad, 2003). Barad (2007) describes this as an onto-epistemological stance where knowing happens not from a distance but a direct engagement with the world. Thus, performativity emphasizes active and ongoing processes of creating something new, and our exploration focuses on *performative potentials* (Jusslin, 2020), which indicates that something new happens when engaging with Poetry on the Wall. A performative potential can take meaning-making in different directions, emphasizing the dynamic and multiple possibilities of becomings rather than static beings.

Drawing on Barad (2007), we understand Poetry on the Wall as a *material-discursive phenomenon* produced by different human and non-human bodies that *intra-act*. Barad’s

concept of *intra-action* disrupts a dichotomizing worldview to account for its relational and entangled nature. Hence, meanings and materialities constitute a material-discursive phenomenon, and the relations between the material and the discursive are entangled (Barad, 2003). In light of literary education, we perceive the material-discursive phenomenon of Poetry on the Wall as a performative space and move our focus toward the *negotiations* of different interpretations and their unfolding(s) and becoming(s) (Höglund, 2017; Höglund & Rørbech, 2021). Literary interpretations, in the broadest sense, are dynamic and active negotiation processes, emphasizing the explorative and undecidable aspects of literary reading (Höglund, 2017; Höglund & Rørbech, 2021).

Such performative negotiation processes encourage engagement with the text or artwork. Our understanding of *engagement* builds on Lemieux (2020), who moved beyond reading engagement as a fixed entity and proposed engagement as a holistic immersion in reading that emphasizes the open result of aesthetic engagements. Lemieux maintained that engagement “is unpredictable and comes in waves, which are also unpredictable” (p. 38). This view presupposes a *being-with* the text, including being-with thoughts, the un/comfortable, the yet-to-be, the affective, and the cognitive (Lemieux, 2020). Consequently, we recognize that multiple human and non-human bodies become performative when engaging with Poetry on the Wall. These engagements are a way of being-with the text, epitomizing our analytical process when putting these theoretical concepts to work with Poetry on the Wall.

Methodology

This study drew on arts-based research (ABR), which involves actively using different art forms in the research process and product (Leavy, 2020; Østern, 2017). Existing at the intersection of art and science, ABR entails researching with the arts as captivating, emotional, and lived processes that move and affect participants (Leavy, 2020; Østern, 2017). We position this methodological approach within a performative research paradigm (Bolt, 2016; Østern et al., 2021), where doing research means creating something new that would not exist without the researcher’s involvement, because knowing cannot happen at a distance (cf. Barad, 2007). Such research is practice-led, and its knowledge-creation happens in different forms of expression, not only in verbal language (Østern et al., 2021).

We performatively engaged with Vidha Saumya’s Reading List, the artwork’s fourth iteration at Åbo Akademi University (ÅAU), installed in 2020 upon invitation from the university’s postdoctoral researcher and residential artist, Lena Séraphin. Vidha described Reading List (which, as mentioned above, included 96 authors and writers from India) as a proposal or suggestion in the form of a poem. She consciously included both established authors as well as previously unpublished writers. In Vidha’s experience, poetry can hold more nuanced information, contexts, and opinions with the act of suggestion. She emphasized that Reading List was *a* reading list, not *the* reading list, which implied that it was inclusive, changeable,

and potentially endless.

Considering we are researchers and teacher educators of literacy and literary education and Reading List intertwines literary and visual elements, we invited visual arts experts Vidha, Lena, and art educator Johanna Halme to join us in October 2020 for a dialogue on Reading List. Figure 2 presents the five dialogue participants who gave informed consent to publish their full names and accepted the article before publication. The 80-minute dialogue was audio-recorded, and we discussed the background of Reading List, the intention behind its installation at ÅAU, the combination of literary and visual elements, and how the artwork could be used pedagogically. The dialogue, thus, included cross-artistic perspectives: the artist-poet as the creator of Reading List, the visual arts perspectives of Lena and Johanna, and our poetry pedagogical perspectives.

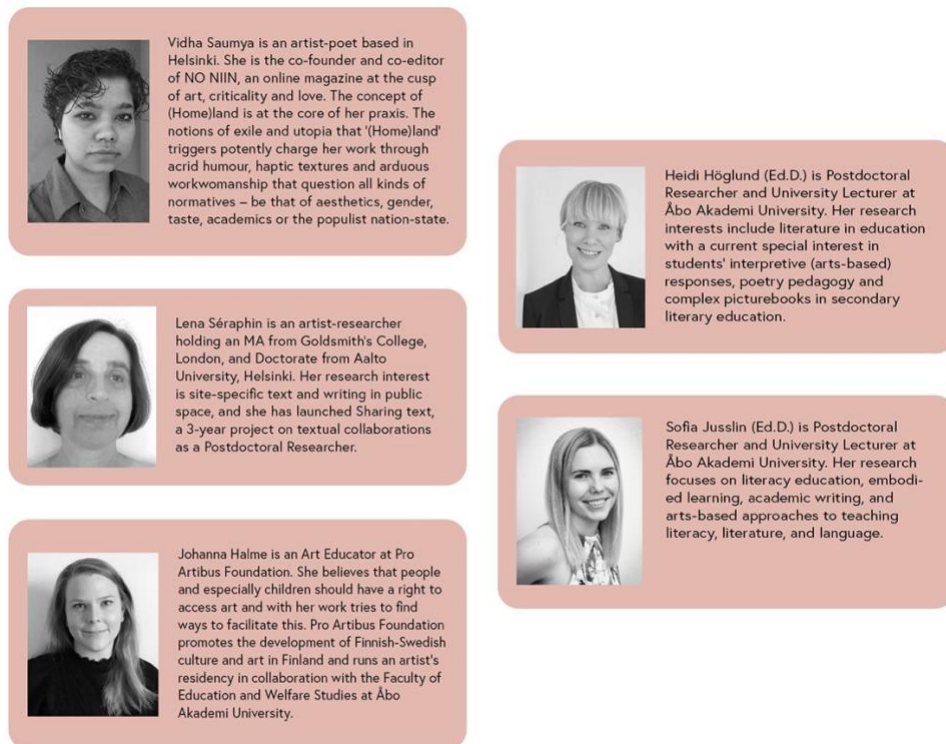


Figure 2. Presentation of the participants (Visual design: Johanna Halme)

As performative researchers, we are fundamentally entangled with the researched phenomenon, and our researcher-bodies are resources in our research (Østern et al., 2021); the research would not exist without our embodied engagements. Therefore, in addition to the dialogue on Reading List, the data also includes embodied data through our own engagements with Reading List (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020). Our lived, body-minded presence and

engagement with Reading List escapes language and includes emotional, sensual, and response data (St. Pierre, 1997). Emotional data entails emotional aspects of engaging with Reading List, sensual data encompasses our bodily acts of participating in the exploration of the poem, and response data includes the participants' responses given in the dialogue. We produced this data through our engagement with Reading List; we sensed and touched it in our embodied engagements. Consequently, the data encompasses the audio-recorded dialogue between the five participants and our (Heidi's and Sofia's) embodied engagements with Reading List.

Analytical Process

In our analysis, we used Jackson's and Mazzei's (2012) *thinking with theory* approach, which puts theories to work in empirical data instead of interpreting the material through systemic coding and identifying themes or narratives. Influenced by Deleuze and Guattari, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) use the idea of *plugging in* to describe their thinking with theory approach. Plugging in is a process that connects theory and philosophical concepts to data, which are read through each other and put to work "to produce something new is a constant, continuous process of making and unmaking" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 1). By thinking with theory, we focused on what kind of potential engagement Poetry on the Wall may encourage in poetry education.

First, we read the transcribed dialogue independently. Second, we discussed our readings and the theory, discovering that similar aspects captured us when reading the dialogue and ultimately found coherence in our readings. The analysis resulted in four potentials, elaborated in the following section, which will present the most arresting parts of the dialogue and our performative engagements with Reading List. It includes Vidha's quotations about Reading List presented poetically, excerpts from the dialogue, and photographs of Reading List to showcase the range of voices and cross-artistic perspectives. Our analysis did not attempt to represent *the* reality (cf. Østern et al., 2021) regarding Poetry on the Wall; but instead engaged with it to explore its potential for poetry education.

Potentials of Poetry on the Wall

Inviting Engagement with Poetry on the Wall

*If education is not being given to everyone,
then the goddess of knowledge can only be someone*



who has received it very easily.

Vidha Saumya

Figure 3. Photograph of Reading List (Photography: Lars Rebers)

Lena

It [Reading List] has this physical presence, which I think is hugely important, especially as we know that students sit in that space very often, and it's quite like an everyday place to be, and it also goes together very well with the piece. You are doing,

whatever you are doing, and you are chitchatting, and you are reading. And also, you are kind of responding to the work surrounding you.

Vidha

Yes, we were discussing how this idea of leaving this kind of space was also that as you enter this space and even when we have the tables... that you don't feel that

suddenly you have to confront this work, that it's like literally, physically, it's not even there at the corner of your eye and you can, and honestly that was my goal... In that sense, when we were discussing how the mural has been painted, we had a discussion that I don't want to paint it in a very dark color as it is the thing that you must do, like the inscription on the wall thing. And that's why also the visual elements to it, the fact that they look already worn out or scraped to invite a kind of touching, spoiling it, you know, doing something to it and that I find very important to do in art...

Johanna

One of the goals that we also, or thing, that we have discussed with Lena is how can we reach students beyond the subject of arts that the students study here, or arts education: how can we integrate the work and art in other subjects as well? And, I think that this piece is maybe, I'm not saying, lowering the threshold, but in a sense it's not close to the art studio here. It's in a space that is accessible to everyone [...] This is maybe a way to start this discussion and these meetings with even more people here.

Throughout the dialogue, we reflected on the performative potential of offering invitations to engage with poetry and art in various ways; in particular, we addressed the issues of visibility and admission to poetry and art. Merging literary and visual elements in this entangled manner created opportunities to attract readers in new and different ways outside of places where poetry is traditionally found, lowering the threshold for engaging with poetry. One of Reading List's key principles is that it should be placed in visible locations, such as an official university building (Figure 3). However, it was not showcased on a "pedestal" but integrated into the everyday environment of a university building. Font types, colors, and techniques were deliberately chosen to invite engagement with the artwork. For example, touching and sensing its materiality (Figure 5) invited engagement through various senses. Locating Reading List in a hallway invited those walking by to engage with the artwork. Further, the invitation extended to people who did not actively seek poetry but encountered it unexpectedly through poetry visualized and materialized in the physical environment.

Seizing Engagements with Poetry on the Wall

*I realized I cannot be sitting on the fence; I have to take a side,
and my side was that of resistance.*

Vidha Saumya

Vidha

I have taken out certain names because kind of keeping in mind currently the social and political climate in India, where the idea of caste oppression has really taken a forefront in terms of, and in all fields, it's not just in terms of as a society, how do we

function, what are the policies that the government are introducing or cancelling, but also, in the field of academia, especially, who are the people that get published?...For me, it became very important to put together such names that have, for whom it is not a matter of publishing five books or ten books again, sort of a reading list that they would be referred to, but the act of getting education, to be able to write and then finding some kind of possibility of getting published.

Heidi

When you describe all this, to me it's like not just about the right to write. It's about the right to exist.

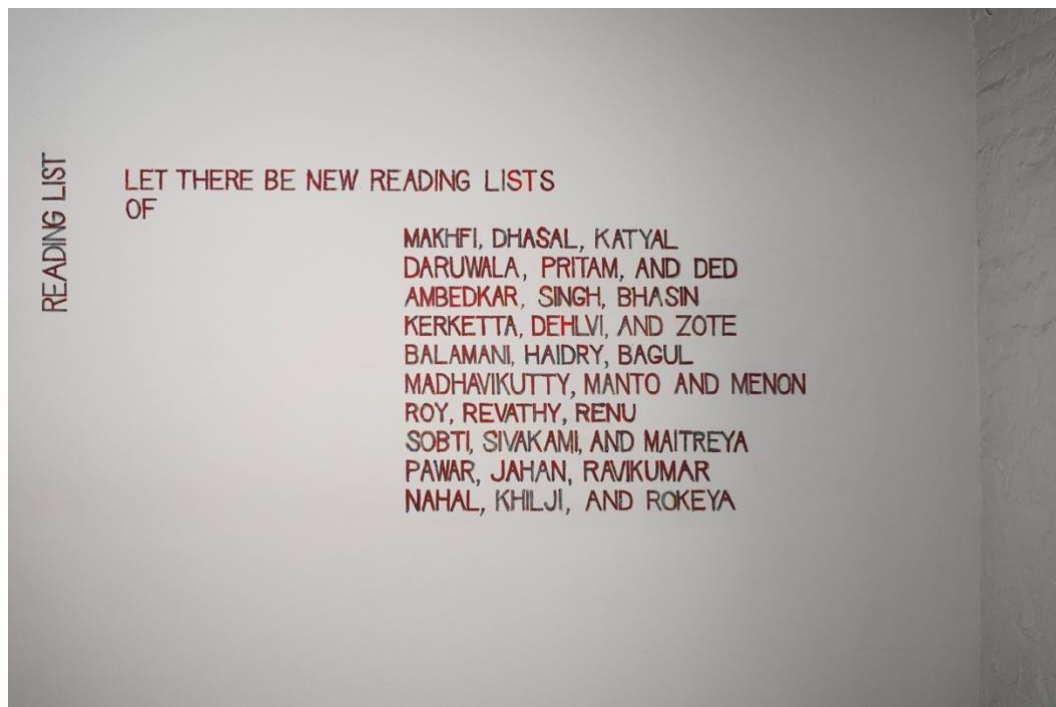


Figure 4. Photograph of the beginning of Reading List (Photography: Lars Rebers)

Engaging with the poem made us stop—or seize—and reflect on its timeliness concerning social and global issues. It enabled intra-actions (Barad, 2007) with matters beyond our local context. In choosing which authors and writers to include, Vidha carefully kept India's current political and social climate in mind. The thoughts behind the choices and the list of 96 authors and writers prompted us to question what we read and whose voices we listen to, challenging and negotiating Western canonical reading lists. We realized that we did not know any of the names presented in the poem (Figure 4). This questioning pointed to the performativity of Reading List and how it set in motion—or seized—moments to reflect on cultural biases, hierarchical structures, and, by extension, fundamental human rights.

Another timely aspect of Poetry on the Wall was its temporality.

Lena

Something that I think is also important to say is that I find that it's kind of also ...the subject matter of the piece; it's a temporary painting. And there's a reason, I find for myself, it means also in a way, if I am very straightforward, that we should not take art for granted, either. Art can be here, but it can also not be here. So, we know now that this work of art will be here until the end of 2021, so whatever we want to do with it, we have this kind of timeframe in order to do it. And I think that, for me, that feels quite important, and it also stresses the work, that it's here now but then you know it's not anymore. I hope that it kind of heats up the attention.

Sofia

Because even though the art piece has a given timeline, what you said about the proposal, I interpret that as being outside the given timeline, to start reflecting about how the reading list can be endless and how the participants and those of us who get to participate and experience artwork, what we take with us and what we do in terms of actions and thoughts and reflections, that expands the timeline. Perhaps even though the artwork isn't there, our actions will bring something...

Lena

Yes, so again, there is this rise of paths.

Heidi

Our actions with the artwork, but also the students and everyone who come across the artwork on the time being there.

The limited timeframe for Reading List highlighted the importance of engaging with it while it was there and of not taking art for granted. The timeframe enhanced some key principles of Reading List: the poem was changeable, potentially endless, and possible to (re)negotiate. Still, although it was temporary, the poem may have set in motion actions and reflections that had the performative potential to extend the given timeline: Readers could act upon the poetry even though it was no longer there. Because the poem's installation was temporary, the poem was not there forever but spoke to readers in contemporary times. It had the potential to be timely and negotiable concerning social and global issues.

Intensifying Engagements With/in Poetry on the Wall

*For me, it is a resistance towards this understanding
of hierarchy and knowledge and knowledge systems.*

Vidha Saumya



Figure 5: Photograph of Reading List (Photography: Lars Rebers)

Lena

For me as an artist, my kind of primary way of engaging with art is to be in contact with it. And I think, also, that when you are within the piece, this “rub-off” really happens. You know, you experience with your bodily senses: this piece is around me. I can also go very close, and I can even touch it. It has this physical presence, which I think is hugely important...

Sofia

When I came up to the seventh floor, I immediately went to the artwork, and I stood in the middle of it and could actually feel what you are talking about in accordance with... the embodied experience, and I became aware of my own awareness and knowledge. I felt quite small, but I started thinking about what the three-dimensionality captured. I was drawn into Reading List, and it made me move in a way along the reading list. It made me reflect upon what I know and what I don't know.

Reading List raised questions about what counts as knowledge in contemporary society, which was one critical point of the artwork. Vidha sought to create resistance toward knowledge systems that exclude certain writers and types of knowledge. These questions were strengthened through non-human aspects like the installation's spatiality and three-dimensionality. Its placement created an opportunity to stand inside the poem, intra-act with it, be surrounded by it (Figure 3), and question what we know and do not know in terms of what we read and do not read. These questions struck us, and the poem's intensity made us pause. The resistance and challenge to knowledge systems became an embodied experience due to the spatiality of Reading List's material-discursive phenomenon. The three-dimensional placement of Reading List also had the performative potential to create the sense of being physically captured by it.

The spatiality and three-dimensionality disrupted and changed how we, as readers, could interpret, negotiate, and bodily engage with poetry. Poetry on paper invites other bodily engagements: Readers can and are allowed to touch the paper, but traditionally, they are not allowed to touch art on walls. Vidha specifically invited readers to touch the artwork, sense its texture (Figure 5), and engage with it; the literary engagement became multisensory. The poem on the three walls also broke the conventions by being written on the walls, something normally not allowed. Altogether, the spatiality and three-dimensionality with and within—with/in—Reading List had the performative potential to intensify engagement with poetry.

Transforming Engagements through Poetry on the Wall

*My interest has been my personal involvement with these writers
in terms of what I have read and what I have received.*

Vidha Saumya

Lena

You, as a viewer, need to adjust yourself also, and I think that this happened to me quite strongly with the piece Reading List... You are constantly juggling your own subjectivity, and this is for me the strongest link to this work because it consists of people, persons, human beings, so there's this huge kind of intersubjective exchange happening.

Johanna

That is also something that can happen when you read something. You are one person when you start a book or a text, or look at art, and then you are another person when you are finishing it. It is wonderful if this piece could do that to maybe all of us.

Sofia

Almost a transformative character in terms of...poetry, visual arts, the three-dimensionality and audiences, researchers, artists, students. Reading List has a transformative power in its own sense, which I think is really interesting.

Heidi

Yes, and also a very personal power as well, what Lena described with these persons almost staring at you from the wall. Not in a bad way but wanting your attention.

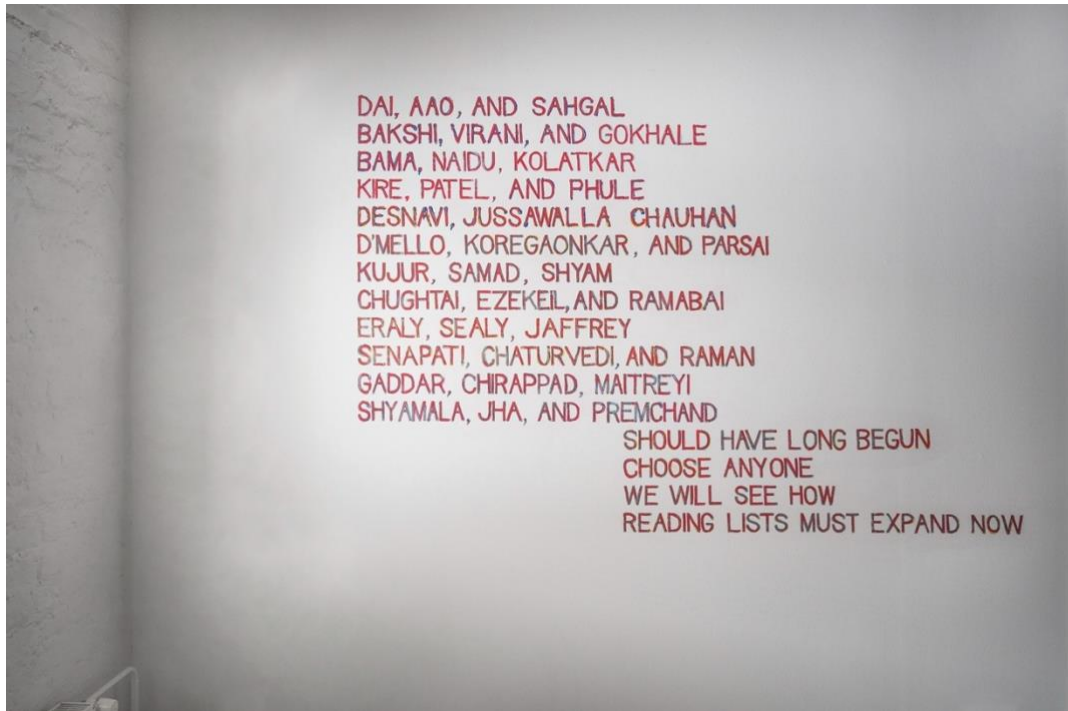


Figure 6. Photograph of the end of Reading List (Photography: Lars Rebers)

Vidha described her personal involvement with the authors and writers, most of whom we had not known about beforehand. On a personal level, we felt that the 96 authors and writers affected us, made us want to know more, and urged us to renegotiate our previous knowledge and perspectives. Not knowing who they were and what they had written felt uncomfortable and ignorant and led us to discuss the issue of the poem's transformative and personal power and the issue of achieving intersubjectivity. Reading List had a transformative character that compelled us to transform in different ways. We changed and adjusted ourselves to engage with the artwork and its messages (Figure 6). The poem created a feeling of simultaneously being allowed and requested to personally transform. In a sense, Vidha and the 96 authors and writers—metaphorically looking back at us and communicating with us from the walls—

called for this transformation. Accordingly, Reading List had the performative potential to simultaneously allow and request our personal transformation concerning who we are and what we know.

Discussion and Conclusions

Based on our analysis, Poetry on the Wall has the potential to invite, seize, intensify, and transform literary engagements. Poetry on the Wall takes poetry to unexpected places and encourages multisensory engagement. Previous research suggests that arts-based approaches to teaching poetry can break curriculum boundaries by enriching, expanding, and reinventing the poetry curriculum (see Jusslin & Höglund, 2021). However, we cautiously approach the claim that Poetry on the Wall would break boundaries because combining poetry with visual arts is a familiar phenomenon in artistic practices (e.g., ekphrasis; Kleppe, 2018). Instead, we argue that Poetry on the Wall challenges curricular boundaries and is a kind of re-thinking of poetry that (re)negotiates what poetry is and where it can be found: not as “stranded forever on the printed page” (Dymoke & Hughes, 2009, p. 93).

The potentials of inviting, seizing, intensifying, and transforming literary engagements overlap and should not be understood separately; together, they produce and are produced by Poetry on the Wall. These potentials are grounded in Reading List; engaging with Reading List enabled this exploration of Poetry on the Wall. While another artwork could have been Poetry on the Wall and produced different performative potentials, we argue that the potentials to invite, seize, and intensify literary engagement can be understood more generally for Poetry on the Wall as a phenomenon. The potential to transform literary engagement was closely related to the issues raised in Reading List and our personal encounters with the poem.

This points to, first, the transferable understanding of Poetry on the Wall to other contexts and poems and, second, the situated and context-specific understanding of Reading List. Based on this study, we submit that the potential of Poetry on the Wall can contribute to new teaching approaches for poetry education. We encourage exploring Poetry on the Wall with students. It could enable literary engagement and provide opportunities to reflect on poetry from unconventional angles. Incorporating visual elements may not be a far stretch for language arts teachers who may be accustomed to working with multimodal approaches to texts. However, we still recognize that collaborating with artists or art educators can enhance aspects of Poetry on the Wall’s cross-artistic approach. Our aim was to study Poetry on the Wall and its potential for poetry education, but more research is needed to understand its implementation in teaching practices.

Ultimately, we return to our exploratory inquiry to summarize what the potentials of engaging with Poetry on the Wall can set in motion for poetry education. Based on this exploration, Poetry on the Wall produces inviting, seizing, intensifying, and transforming literary

engagements. Notably, these were not static but constantly moving and becoming, accentuating the performativity of the literary engagements. Setting these potentials in motion in poetry education epitomizes multisensory explorations with poetry and negotiates literary and visual intertwinements. Poetry on the Wall sets in motion a re-thinking of poetry and where it can be found and created, contributing to a movement that explores alternative ways to reinvigorate poetry in education.

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Vidha Saumya, Lena Séraphin, and Johanna Halme for the dialogue and collaboration. The installation of the artwork at ÅAU was part of the three-year program “Sharing text”, initiated by postdoctoral researcher Lena Séraphin and supported by the Pro Artibus Foundation. We are grateful to the Pro Artibus Foundation for giving permission for the photographs reproduced here.

International Journal of Education & the Arts

<http://IJEa.org>

ISSN: 1529-8094

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