

Making a creative case for the environment

A national discussion on the evolving frontiers of arts-led responses to the ecological issues of our time



Image: Asiyeh Mohamadian

A meeting held at CIWEM, London, on 10 July 2018, organised by members of the Arts & Environment Network, in conjunction with art.earth, the Centre for Contemporary Art & the Natural World, and the Art, Nature & Environment Research group

SUMMARY

Purpose: Since the 1960s, the arts have played an increasingly important role alongside education and the sciences in engaging people and responding to emerging environmental challenges, most recently including climate change. In light of factors such as the USA's withdrawal from the Paris agreement and uncertainty about post-Brexit environmental safeguards in the UK, this meeting considered ways of mapping out a new era of support and collaboration in the arts, and between the arts and other fields, towards more "artfully" wise strategies for the future.

The discussion began by addressing the question:
"Given the transformative challenges we face, how may arts practices be supported to promote ecological resilience?"

1. Promoting clearer understandings of the true nature of ecological arts practices today; why this is important, and the urgency involved

- Arts organisations (and other sectors including education and environment) are generally not understanding the nature of ecological art, and the contribution it is making to some of the most urgent transformations required in society today. Some targeted advocacy on this issue is needed, which can partly be couched in terms of national public interest policy objectives, and partly in terms of inclusion, cohesion, and sustainability etc at local/community level.
- Elements of the approach to emphasise in this include the process-based nature of much of it, interconnectedness, multi-disciplinarity/non-disciplinarity, complexity, uncertainty, systems thinking, pattern-making, place-making, ecological limits, whole life-cycle perspectives, long timescales, etc. The distinction between "artist" and "audience" is often a false one, since the work is often a joint enterprise between places, inhabitants, other organisms, natural processes and collective cultural movements. This all goes far beyond mere reduction of the sector's environmental footprint.
- There would be value, in some contexts, in framing this in terms of a "creative case for the environment" (by analogy to Arts Council England's "creative case for diversity"), particularly to promote more embedding (in governance, policy, standards, funding streams etc) and scaling-up/scaling-across the contribution that this field can make.
- There is a need to elevate the value that is accorded to the artist's voice and the place of arts-led practices in wider contexts.

2. Inclusiveness and diversity

- Addressing "the environment" or "society" is a holistic ambition, but in truth is always partial in some way, and there are many environments and societies. The groups involved in the present discussion are very far from a balanced representation of this, and care is needed when framing work or messages about eg "future generations" to consider who this is actually addressing. As well as throwing out a diversity and inclusiveness challenge to the rest of the world, all our groups have work to do internally to broaden the face we

present, the language we use, and the cultural pre-conditionings we bring to the table.

3. Mapping the field; and documenting examples of what works

- Efforts to monitor and document aspects of the ecological arts field (eg focused on particular topics, or particular geographical areas) are legion, but are also generally quite piecemeal and sometimes short-lived through being only temporarily resourced. There is an appetite to find more effective, connected and durable mechanisms for information and knowledge-exchange (see also separate “networking” section below). Specific ideas for pursuing this should be generated and pursued.
- Initiatives of this kind could perhaps do more to extract the transferable lessons learned, especially models of partnership & synergy, engagement, turning competition into collaboration, access to funding etc that have succeeded.

4. Navigating and influencing the landscape of support

- Institutions have become more specialised and sector-segmented, and greater creativity is required to sew together the shared interests and potential for joint support that may exist. Advocacy on this to the institutions concerned is an important priority.
- Funding tends to be available only for episodic project activities. There is a fundamental gap in support for bridging between projects, more longitudinal practices, embedded collaborations with non-arts stakeholders, research phases, experimentation & testing, networking/career development mechanisms, enduring platforms for information & knowledge-exchange, etc.
- There is scope worth exploring further for support to come from outside the traditional art sector sources; and examples exist in relation to bodies such as health authorities, land management agencies, local authorities, landscape partnerships, research councils etc. Part of the key here is to show how arts-led involvements contribute to these other bodies’ core purposes and associated public benefit/“social value”.
- Linked to the preceding point, there are some acute strategic/structural questions about whether arts sector sources will in future be fit primary supporters of ecologically-relevant art at all. Some radical re-visioning of how streams of funding are organised may be necessary.

5. Other policy & advocacy opportunities

- The ecological arts field has much to offer to environmental policymaking, planning and management. Good work of this kind that happens already could be made more visible. More could happen in future, aided by clearer identification of the channels of influence, building a critical mass of joined-up individual contributions, organised learning from experience, etc. There are many allies in positions of influence in the environmental sector, but sometimes it is merely the difference in the languaging we use that is the barrier to working together.

- Bodies like CIWEM can play a vital role in this, and there is scope for those connected with the present meeting to contribute extra perspectives to the Institution's policy positions and its advocacy with government and in Parliament etc. CIWEM is also an avenue for interaction with the water industry, agencies responsible for national protected area networks, etc. Achieving small shifts at the centre of these bodies can have huge leverage when translated into nationwide practice through their systems.
- The aims of “embedding” and “scaling up” referred to earlier above are also helped by building expertise in art & ecology at governance and senior management levels in organisations in both the arts and environment sectors.
- The role of bodies like CIWEM and the Science and Engineering Councils in professional accreditation and standards for continuing career development has no institutional analogue in the arts sector – perhaps this is an issue to explore with the Arts Councils.
- The status of art with environmental relevance in universities and schools is currently lamentable, and this should be the focus of an advocacy push.

6. Networking, sharing and collaborating

- More networks in this field exist than in the past, but at the same time some previous ones have dwindled or gone, and none is currently securely viable into the future. The present meeting (and its follow-up) is a sincere effort to patch together some boosted links, but good systemic solutions are still elusive.
- Conceptions of a definitive or over-arching national group are probably not appropriate, and some kind of dynamic “matrix” of multi-level connections may be a better model. Many communication and information-sharing mechanisms are now freely available; but what is mainly lacking, and the limitation on effectiveness, is any dedicated capacity to give this a coherent architectural shape and to perform the crucial (sometimes labour-intensive) functions of animation, lubrication, brokering and match-making. Perhaps a mini-project could be devised by a core group to take a fresh look at options for addressing this.
- Face-to-face encounters, and joint engagement in real work, perform a network-building function that cannot be replaced by virtual means. There is an appetite for further meetings of the present kind, and CIWEM has offered to host again in London in eg 6 months’ time. There is however also an acute need to embrace a wider range of voices, and to decentralise the dialogue so that it properly involves all parts of the UK. All should be watchful for (or help to create) opportunities to resource encounters in other locations, perhaps by “piggy-backing” on other events or projects etc that may already be planned (including perhaps those in CIWEM’s local branches). The convenors of the present meeting can act as a clearing-house for sharing intelligence about any such opportunities.
- The manner of interaction is also important to consider. “True collaboration involves being changed by the experience”. The most fruitful model for the conversation (and the listening) may be a form of open-space invitation-led

approach that is as welcoming of “difference” as possible, rather than any more “strategically-guided” construct.

- Although the present meeting was not a place to explore specifics, attention at some stage should be given to exploring potential concrete proposals for one or more defined projects that could capitalise on the scope for new “critical mass” collaborations and could be the basis for a funding bid to take forward appropriate actions (including perhaps resourcing the network/alliances process itself, enhancing the benefits provided through the Nick Reeves Arts & Environment Award, innovative residency projects, or other initiatives). Possibilities mentioned included the AHRC’s Research Networking Scheme, and an idea of corporate sponsorship from the water industry through CIWEM to be matched to grant aid from Arts Council England.

7. Conclusion

- This note is intended purely as an aide-mémoire and a contribution to continuing conversations: it has no formal status. The meeting itself was preliminary and exploratory and not intended to reach any decisions. It did however produce a very clear shared sense of positivity, mutual trust for all the various perspectives that were exchanged, and willingness to continue building relationships and supporting each other.

PARTICIPANTS

Chair: Dave Pritchard (Chair, AEN).
Discussion provocateur: David Haley (Vice Chair, AEN).

Plus:

- Clive Adams, CCANW.
- Ewan Allinson, Landscape & Arts Network.
- Bergit Arends, Royal Holloway University.
- Georgia Attlesey, Julie’s Bicycle.
- Victoria Burns, Invisible Dust.
- Alastair Chisholm, CIWEM.
- Laura Coleman, ONCA.
- Anne Marie Culhane, Kaleider/Encounters Arts.
- John Fanshawe, New Networks for Nature/BirdLife International/Cambridge Conservation Initiative.
- Harriet Fraser, Somewhere-nowhere.
- Chris Fremantle, Gray's School of Art/Robert Gordon University and EcoartScotland.
- Flora Gathorne-Hardy, Touchstone collaborations.
- Mark Godber, Artsadmin.
- Loraine Leeson, cSPACE/Middlesex University.
- Simon Read, Arts & Environment Network/Middlesex University.
- Veronica Sekules, GroundWork Gallery.
- Karen Thomas, The Environment Magazine/CIWEM.

Notes by: Dave Pritchard, revised version 1 August 2018