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Weaving Threads in the Earth Crisis

Miranda Matthews

9.14 move to my starting slide

In the midst of climate change caused heatwaves, and a world that many are still experiencing as being in pandemic, the crises of nature are becoming more and more apparent. How can we as adults respond to raise young people into a world they can thrive in and heal? How can we nourish others and ourselves in ways that bring substance back to the Earth, and take cumulative steps to bringing the Earth out of crisis?

Our speakers this year have brought a great range of active and personally invested ways of connecting arts, culture and learning to such questions of ecological awareness, sustainability and cultural reparation. The quotes you saw at the start of the presentation bring into our room of new voices for today, some of the themes that have emerged so far this year.

Weaving threads together, we are going back to ancient, pre-industrial ways of visualising connectivity, in the midst of revolutions of technology and global, digitisation, to bring attention back down to Earth, and to local communities, where we can see the interventions that we are making begin to make a difference to human and other than human lives.

Imaginative creative learning, play, inventive resourcefulness, embodied action, connecting with affect and caring, sensory communication of lived experiences and knowledges, to avoid cognitive and emotive overload, are all ways that CAL speakers and audiences have approached what I would like to term caring and motivational assemblages for learning how to make ecologies in practice.

The supportive sustainable practices that we have been hearing about, mobilise collaboration in dialogical and lateral arts projects, with particular attention to the starting places of learning participants, and ways to align with their interests and experiences. Ecologies in practice are keeping positive energies moving towards valuing nature, creating spaces for visualising alternatives to the often expedient ways that the Earth's living beings and minerals are forcibly 'cleared' and extracted. Sustainable practices are creating traction towards Earth mobility, in entertaining and informing those who might otherwise find enjoyment in trashing the Earth.

Ecological motivational assemblages are moving human resources of agency, capacity and imagination, that are being wasted, and thinned to nothing, by forces of capitalism into life-supporting practices. Embodied, material investigative arts forms arguably have a particularly important role in enabling further learning capacity, and working with sustainable materials and processes.

I will link to a few examples in my own teaching and experience this year, that have made learning experiences of ecology in the arts and the Earth Crisis particularly apparent. Learning with the work of cultural activists such as Bridget McKenzie (CAL 1.11.21), theorists such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins (2019) Felix Guattari (2008), Erin Manning (Manning and Massumi 2014, CAL 14.12.22) and Dennis Atkinson (CAL 14.12.21), I have gradually increased projects for students at undergraduate and postgraduate level that explore Ecologies in Practice.

Affective presence of mind and body in practice research is enabling ways of transforming the anger and frustration of lived experiences that Sasha Mballa Ekobena talked of (CAL 1.11.21), to become eco-capacities, as Bridget McKenzie talked about in her CAL presentation, 22 November 2021. Arts practice needs to be given the space to make current and future possibilities for transformative thinking and creative social action (Hill Collins 2019).

The image you have seen accompanying this presentation, is from an Ecologies in Practice body of sessions that I taught to undergraduate students. These students have been determined to continue their arts practice despite ongoing pandemic conditions and former educational exclusion from arts practice in dwindling state provision. We went to the V&A and tried to find artefacts that linked to lived cultural experiences. Some could not find any work that related in the collection, some could. Students then worked from their own cultural memory objects, and their recollections of the curated V&A objects, to make sculpture from found and recycled materials. Further ecologies in practice were made as students created a motivational assemblage of their made objects, and put embodied energies into making a collaborative painting.

Show Emily's quote and discuss how she explored how unwanted European clothing is sent to Africa and is called 'Dead White Man's Clothes'. The project enabled complex storied of lived experience in practice, and encouraged inventive decolonialism.

Play Shahana's video

Fortunately we were able to work with the TATE this year for Ecologies in Practice in the MA Arts and Learning, forming critical pedagogies that could bring in the voices of marginalised groups, who often have something sensible to say and do about the Earth Crisis. We related to the arts and curatorial practices of international practitioners such as Heather Bruegl of native American Forge Projects NYC, Jennifer Steverson – a decolonial artist working with African knowledges of plant dyes, Amanda Piña an eco-feminist performance artist of Nada Projects, Giulia Casalini, eco-feminist curator, and Michael Smythe of Nomad Projects, with a mobile apothecary redolent of WochenKlausur's Project 1 the Medical Van for the Homeless. Michael Smythe also convenes Phytology a practice research community venture in East London. MA students created their own pedagogical explorations, connecting with theories of eco-feminism, diasporic ecologies, arts and ecology for wellbeing and reparative justice.

At times, like Erin Manning said in her discussion of starting places for writing (14.12.21), I have felt the entangled 'anguish' and 'confusion' of multiple tensions, so to focus on the Earth Crisis, and making spaces for response to this requires some determination, and at times a gathering of fragments, and a reflection on how momentary breathing spaces for action on the Earth crisis have been created. Sometimes the context for practice is burst into by the limitations for activist presences: how does one respond to activists gluing themselves to historical paintings in the context of education for example? How does one respond to a visit of Greta Thunberg to a school where there is a Greta Thunberg class, in the context of the school strike? These are politics of global crises, acted out in the minutiae of daily learning experiences.

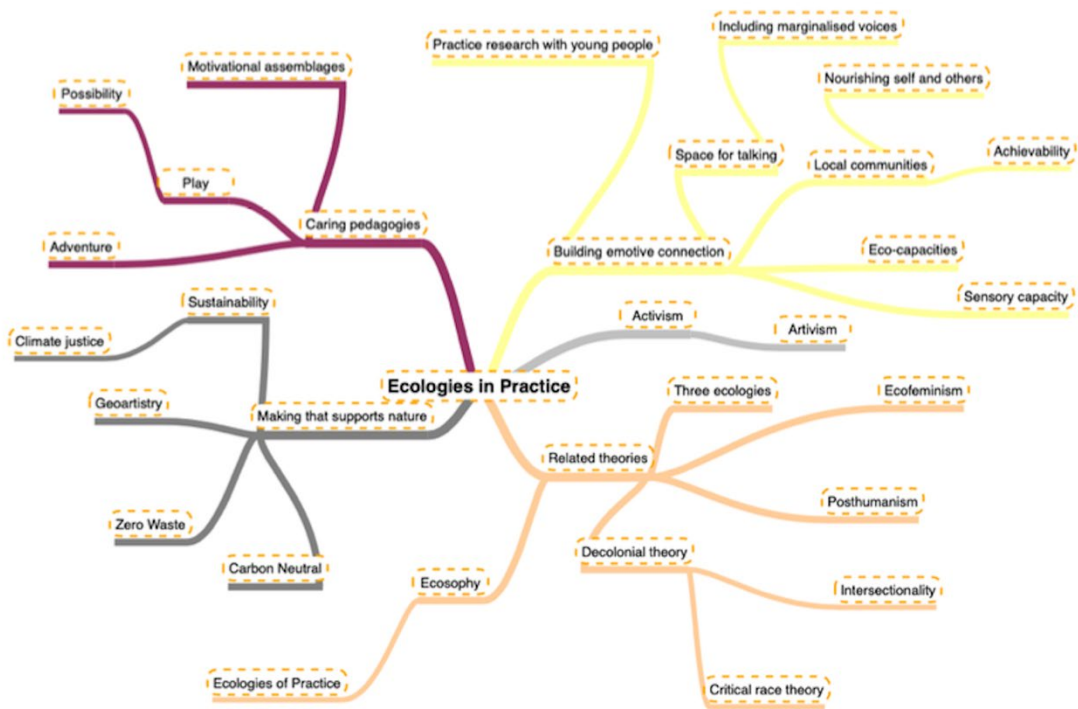
Some of these life tensions can be related to in anecdotes of lived experience from our own dimensionalities of being, my dimensionalities include being practitioner researcher, an arts educator, a writer, an artist and a parent. Our dimensions of self also meet across self-definitions and societal definitions of gender, race, class, sexuality and ability, as we reflect on what we can bring forward for future generations that is good for them and good to the Earth.

For example recently on a camping trip, with my son and a group of 11 children and their parents, I awoke at 4am to the sound of multiple birds singing, a thriving dawn chorus, of other than human diversity communicating a new day, it was astonishing for me living in the city, where animals are pared back, killed on the roads, kept on leads.

On the second morning I recorded the sound, as a collaborative action in ecological arts practice. In this I was in awe of the artistry of nature, its joy and conviviality, as David Fancy says, 'the capacity for other-than-human entities to *experience* artistic production' (Fancy 2018, 218). And this experience reminded me that coexistence between human arts and nature can be taken for granted, or even totally forgotten when one is living and working in an overcrowded space, sometimes where even cacti don't survive.

(Play birdsong)

In London I wake to the sound of one solitary bird, with a refrain that calls to mind the Deleuzian sense of a refrain (Deleuze and Guattari 2013), as a nostalgia for company and diversity. It is this sense of biodiversity in company, shared awareness of how to take action on each new day, and vocalisation of affect and strategy that I hope we can build as caring, motivational assemblages for learning in arts practice. The Centre for Arts and Learning is continuing to work on Ecologies in Practice, in partnership with Climate Museum UK in 2022-23.



I will now hand over to Ben Dixon, for 'Urban Acoustemology: Why listen to Concrete?'

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