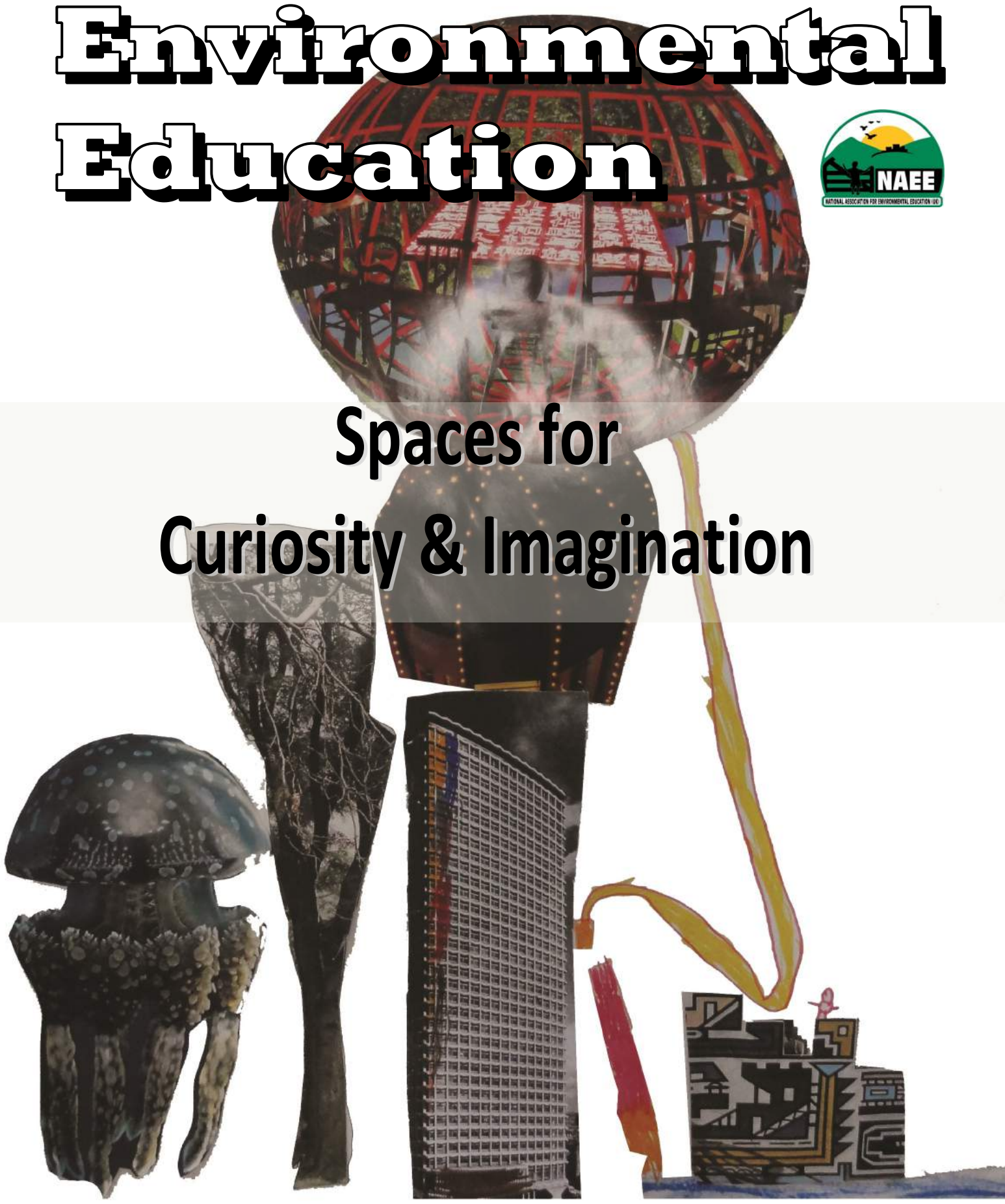
ISSN 0 309-8451 Vol 126 Spring 2021

Environmental Education

Spaces for Curiosity & Imagination



The Journal of the National Association for Environmental Education (UK)

National Association for Environmental Education (UK)

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Environmental Education | Volume 126, Spring 2021

Editors Ruth Sapsed, Dr Elsa Lee, Juliette Green

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ISSN 03098451

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Front cover image: a recycled house: making new habitations out of old; made by ArtScapers from Mayfield Primary School with artist Susanne Jasilek. **Back cover image:** a fantastical map of Spinney Wild Woods, working with material from a wild exchange between Jackie Kay and the children of Spinney Primary School (2015) © Elena Arévalo Melville.

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***Environmental Education* is the termly journal of the NAEE. Views expressed in the articles of this journal are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of NAEE.**

Paper: cover 150gsm Regency Silk paper (FSC mix); pages: 90gsm uncoated recycled paper (FSC recycled)

Printed by Mail & Print, Salisbury

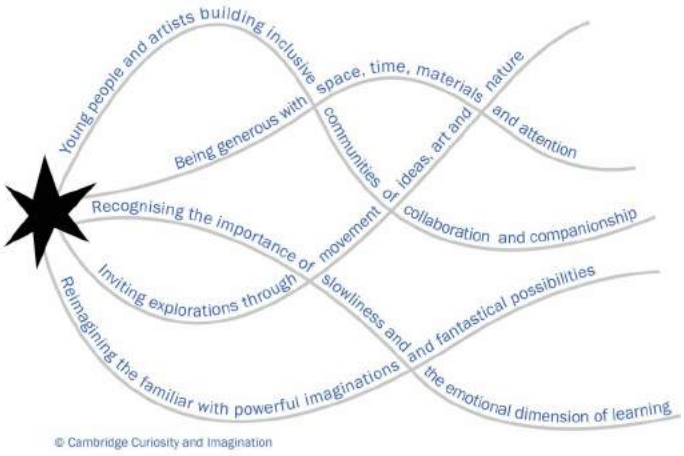
EDITORIAL

Spaces for Curiosity and Imagination

Ruth Sapsed

We've been thinking about the qualities of spaces that nourish curiosity and imagination since we came together nearly 20 years ago now. Originally a loose network of artists, educators, researchers and professionals from heritage and culture, we were troubled by what we felt was the continual erosion of young people's freedom and a scandalous neglect of their fantastic creative powers. Calling ourselves the Cambridge Centre for Curiosity and Imagination, we thought we were working towards opening up a shared space that could host creative projects and research.

What we've discovered as we've worked in partnership with all sorts of organisations and with all ages of people in many different places, is that it is the qualities of practice in any space that are critical – the core elements of a creative pedagogy - and you can bring these to wherever you are working, whether it is a hospital corridor or a wild wood, a recycling centre or a library garden. A charity since 2007, Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination (CCI) shares the principles of practice shown below as those we've found the most significant in our work.



These are woven through all our projects and apply wherever and whenever we are working.

I was interviewed by Rob Hopkins, a leading environmental activist, last year as he was researching ideas for his new book – *From What is to What if: unleashing the power of imagination to create the future we want*. He picks up an idea first raised by Henry Giroux of a 'Disimagination Machine', a phenomenon blighting all of our lives and described by Portuguese musician Whalt Thisne as:

> *"A set of cultural apparatuses extending from schools and mainstream media to the new sites of screen culture, and a public pedagogy that functions primarily to undermine the ability of individuals to think critically, imagine the unimaginable, and engage in thoughtful and critical dialogue: put simply to become critically informed citizens of the world."* [1]

Perhaps if we'd spent more time imagining the unimaginable, some of the current crises could have been avoided. One thing we can be certain about at the moment is uncertainty – for our children and the rhythm of their daily lives, for our communities and the structures we depend on, for the planet and the systems that support it.

Finding ways to be pro-active and optimistic in the face of all this can feel overwhelming. This special issue brings together a collection of practitioners documenting examples of ever more important pockets of creative activism taking place in the UK today.

Here are insights from just a few of the wonderful colleagues I've met or had the privilege to work with. They describe how all sorts of spaces have been discovered alongside young people and their communities; public urban spaces (Bath's *Forest of Imagination* and *City Mill Skate* in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park); our local, sometimes muddy, spaces (a Newcastle woodland, a small school in Worthing, Hareclive in south Bristol); boundaried spaces (a Cambridge primary school and the *Eco-capabilities* programme); virtual spaces (*The Art of Creative Care*) and, importantly, imaginative spaces *(Writing the future* and *Liberated Learning).*

These are communities of practice pushing back against the 'disimagination machine' in joyful and powerful ways to enable young people and their communities to discover and work with their full potential to be imaginative and curious thinkers and actors, to *"become critically informed citizens of the world",* as Thisne puts it. Thank you to the editors of this journal for connecting us all together here in this way and to my colleague Mary Jane Drummond who has supported the editing process and reminded me of the importance of not working alone.

The words in this manifesto shown below, created by young people in May 2019 after working as artists in residence in the University of Cambridge's Faculty of Education, constitute a bold checklist for how we might want to encourage others as they explore the spaces around them:

Be free
Imagine anything
Have fun
Know anyone can do it, there are no wrong answers
Share and talk
Not rush
Try things out and experiment – make a mess
See that art is everywhere
Keep trying
Move around, be comfortable
Be brave and trust

.....

Ruth Sapsed is the Director of Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination.

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

Creativity, education and the environment

Professor Justin Dillon

Although I direct the University of Exeter's Centre for Research in STEM Education (mercifully shortened, most of the time, to CRISTEME), I'm also an active member of the Creativity and Emergent Educational-futures Network (CEEN). CEEN brings together a diverse group of staff, students and associates who all do work that argues for the centrality of difference and emergence in our practices of thinking, being and doing and we all recognise the necessity of researching education beyond boundaries.

In the UK, creativity as an idea in education has seen a resurgence of interest, partly as a result of the *Durham Commission on Creativity and Education* – a collaboration between the Arts Council and Durham University. Their report argued that: *"In all areas of life, from the sciences and humanities to the arts, creativity is seen as the ability to think laterally and come up with imaginative solutions to problems, to work across disciplines or to enjoy constructive play"* [2]. Certainly, 2020 has provided multiple examples of the need for creativity, whether it has been in finding ways to survive being locked down or in developing new teaching approaches to engage our students through technologies.

Around the world, a number of countries have adopted a more creativity-focused education system, such as Australia, Canada, Finland and Singapore. One specific desired outcome of the Singaporean curriculum is that students should be creative and have an enquiring mind. There's an assumption here, not shared by everyone, that creativity can be taught and measured. It will be interesting to see how the OECD's PISA tests measure creativity in 2022 when their new 'Creative Thinking Framework' is operationalised.

What we do know is that *"opportunities for free play, exploration of outdoor environments and interaction with other children and with adults, whether parents, carers or early years workers, [are] all seen as being key to encouraging creativity"* (Durham Commission, 2019, p. 29). Arts-based approaches to education, which some see as under threat in the UK, offer wonderful opportunities to engage and reframe our relationship with, and understanding of, the environment. Last year we saw how engagement with nature and the outdoors could benefit our mental and physical health and increase our resilience to new threats to our ways of life. This edition of Environmental Education offers us a chance to reflect on our experiences and look at novel ways of engaging with the world within us and around us.

Justin Dillon is Professor of Science and Environmental Education and Director of the Centre for Research in STEM Education at the University of Exeter. He is a Trustee of the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom and of the Exeter Science Centre.

FROM THE CHAIR

Artistic and creative interpretations of environmental issues

Nina Hatch

Starting out as the Rural Studies Association, then later renamed NAEE, our Association has been a key organisation since the 1960s, specifically supporting the growth and delivery of environmental education activities within the school curriculum. Artistic and creative interpretations of environmental issues have of course been a vehicle for teachers to inspire and involve their pupils at all stages of education for many decades. Even Victorian and Edwardian schooling used observational drawing to stimulate their pupils' understanding of the natural world.

Visiting schools over the years, I have seen many EE-related collages, paintings, photos, models and children's writing brightening up classroom and corridor walls. An obvious 'hands on' cross-curricular means of curriculum development and understanding. Stories and poetry relating to environmental issues have also inspired generations of pupils. That has been evidenced in articles published in our paper journal since the first edition was published in 1971. Then more recently in our online versions and through the website and curriculum guides. The contents of this latest edition of our journal continue this tradition.

The breakthrough for environmental education came in 1990 when it was specifically introduced as a cross curricular theme. Unfortunately this recognition was short-lived as it then disappeared as a specific curriculum area of reference in the 1994 National Curriculum review and continued to be missing from the 2014 streamlined version. Despite this, teachers and educators – and of course NAEE – continue to develop creative means to inspire, educate in, about and for the environment. Whether in their school grounds or through visits to other sites, understanding, questioning and respect for the environment is brought into the classroom. A mantra that I learnt early in my teaching career, and have always used, is 'take nothing but memories and pictures and leave nothing but footprints'. So that implies respect, artistic and creative interpretation alongside scientific enquiry.

It also makes me realise that, as NAEE approaches its 50th anniversary, we must review our own 'back story'. It means we should also celebrate the artistic and creative aspects of EE that we have described and promoted in publications and conferences over those 50 years!

Nina Hatch is Centre Director and Educational Lead at Mount Pleasant School Farm in Worcestershire mountpleasantschoolfarm.com. She is an NAEE Trustee and Chair of the Executive Committee.

‘Out and About’ at Mayfield

Paula Ayliffe

Mayfield Primary School’s involvement with arts and wellbeing charity Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination started six years ago with the project called ArtScapers: an arts education programme that brings artists together with local communities to foster creative health for people of all ages. Together we explored the area now known as Eddington, on our doorstep, as it grew and changed.

Exploring how the community was changing

During the first year of this project Jared, aged 8, said:

> *“Being an ArtScaper means to look at something and make your own ideas…then…mix it up so you can make something even bigger and newer…then just design it.. then just find stuff that might be used in the future and use that...”*

This early observation hinted at the traits so sought after today in our schools – we long for children to be creative, reflective, adaptive, innovative. Jared told us clearly that ArtScapers could do just that.

Part of Mayfield Primary School’s grounds

Three years later, another 8 year old said:

> *“We always have to copy someone else’s idea and get our work to look like theirs. When you’re an ArtScaper you use your own idea and then show it to others. Actually you show it to yourself too because it helps you to sort out what your own brain is telling you.”*

As teachers, we are constantly modelling the ‘right’ way to write, draw, calculate and think. These children told us of the power of ArtScapers – that it provided a space for ideas to develop and a theatre and audience to show these ideas to others. Staff who accompanied the children commented on how being an ArtScaper impacted them as educators:

> *“Redesigning a site is comparable to redesigning yourself”.*

ArtScapers reminded teachers of the qualities and essence of teaching that drew them into the profession: the time and space it gives, the working alongside children rather than talking at or to them, the sense of ‘we’re learning this together, but I’m here to guide and support you’. These benefits were too great to lose. We are fortunate to have large grounds and for years we have been saying we must use them more. We have long had a policy that families can play in the school grounds at the end of the day and in holiday time but now we wanted to think how to make much greater use of them throughout the school day too.

Here was the opportunity and we needed to use what we had learnt quickly before the impetus was forgotten.

To ArtScape – verb / ArtScaper – noun

To affect and be affected by art and nature and space

To create a response from materials and feelings in order to express new ideas

To enhance the environment in ways that delight

'Out and About', whatever the weather!

We timetabled half a day out of the classroom for every child every week, whatever the weather. We called it 'Out and About' and it is non-negotiable. Teachers are encouraged to not just take a lesson outside that could be taught inside, but to do something different, let the children take much more of a lead and ask themselves: 'what am I learning about these children from being outside that I didn't know before?'

However, when children are outside there are no walls, children move further away and curiosity takes over. Staff could see that the children took 'the lesson' in different ways and in different directions. Teachers slowly began to relax and reduce their planning. They saw that some children who find 'traditional lessons' difficult started to flourish; others found being outside too different from the norm, too unpredictable, too chaotic. Some children, whose first language is not English, discovered that they could participate much more fully.

As the term progressed, the weather turned increasingly cold and wet. It is easy to go 'Out and About' when the weather is warm and dry, but we could sense an impending dread of afternoons when this was not the case. We asked CCI to run 'A Day in the Woods' for us, an INSET event for all the staff. We needed teachers to see that, with the right clothing and the right stimulus, a day spent outside, even when it is cold and wet, is potentially far more productive and long lasting than another lesson inside. And so, on January 4th 2019 we went to Ashlyn Woods where artists Caroline Wendling and Filipa Pereira-Stubbs lead a whole day of experiencing and thinking about what the outdoors can offer us and our children back at school.

A year later we have teachers who are starting to let go, plan much less and relax alongside the children.

Expectations of how these sessions go are no longer fixed but expanded. The school grounds seem so much bigger as everyone gets to know them better. The children have commented that they enjoy the space and time to think: *"no one is looking over my shoulder to check, the pressure is less"*. Teachers are no longer worrying about what to specifically plan for these sessions, but instead are saying *'this lesson needs to happen outside'*.

So what is the impact of this? We can see that the wellbeing of everybody has benefitted and behaviour has improved as the adults start to trust the children more. Opportunities for everyone to express themselves more creatively have helped to improve the quality and quantity of writing; children are finding it easier to get started because their ideas are flowing more easily. This knowledge was vital during lockdown. The outdoors were in use constantly for those in school and featured in the daily offer for our children who remained at home. Included in this offer were the creative care packages designed by CCI artists.

Mayfield staff's INSET day in Ashlyn Woods

During lockdown we appointed four new teachers and featured 'Out and About' in our advertisement. We had 37 applications and managed to appoint people who wanted to join us because we recognize that spending time outdoors is a crucial part of what we offer all of our children.

Paula Ayliffe is co-headteacher of Mayfield, a two-form primary school in the north of Cambridge.

More information: mayfieldcambridge.org

Let's change things: a journey into children's creative activism

Shani Ali, Paul Bradley & Ingrid Skeels

"Adults follow paths, Children explore." **– Neil Gaiman**

"In a gentle way, you can shake the world." **– Mahatma Gandhi**

'Let's change things' was the first banner that Room 13 Hareclive children ever made, carried purposefully out of school in a procession through the local streets. On a later occasion, the banner was marched into City Hall for a Bristol City Council event. And later still, it hung in the Tate Exchange studio at Tate Modern, alongside other Room 13 Hareclive artworks and activist films on show[3]. Each time children wanted something different: safer streets with reduced traffic; free bus travel; and their voices to be heard and acted on. On each occasion, they felt listened to, and people started to respond. It seems that through creating work, relationships and situations with children's creativity and voice at their heart, small quiet shifts start to happen.

How did we get to 'Let's Change Things'? We'd like to tell you about Room 13 Hareclive's approach and the creative environmental project that shifted our activism onto a different level. Most importantly, we want to tell you more about the simple, transplantable seeds at the heart of all our work: time and space for children's imagination, and listening to what they think and feel.

Room 13 Hareclive

Room 13 Hareclive[4] is an independent artists' studio based in the grounds of Hareclive E-Act primary school in Hartcliffe, south Bristol: a space where children can come at breaks and lunchtimes to follow their own interests and ideas, at their own pace, supported by an adult artist educator. A team of children helps to run the space, and older Room 13ers come back for some projects.

Hareclive is one of the most disadvantaged communities in England. And yet, Hareclive children – as everywhere – have innate talent, creativity and gifts to grow into and to offer. We have been working with 'generations' of Hareclive children since 2003 in Room 13's collaborative, democratic way. The result is a culture where children are both free and supported to think, speak, act and create according to individual and collective inspirations, explorations and concerns – with results that still amaze us, every day of the year.

At the heart of all this is children's agency, starting with whatever a child wants to look at, draw, make, work on or talk about. It expands to children helping to run the space itself: ordering materials, helping to fundraise, writing emails, running our small shop at break times. And expands again into studio-wide projects where we all collaborate. How should we tackle this challenge? How can we make it happen together? What are the children's thoughts and ideas? Who will do what? After that, children's voice is there in a different way, out in the world, through work in exhibitions, writing, presentations or films. These ingredients have always been present in Room 13, but one project in particular led us to a new kind of creative activism with children.

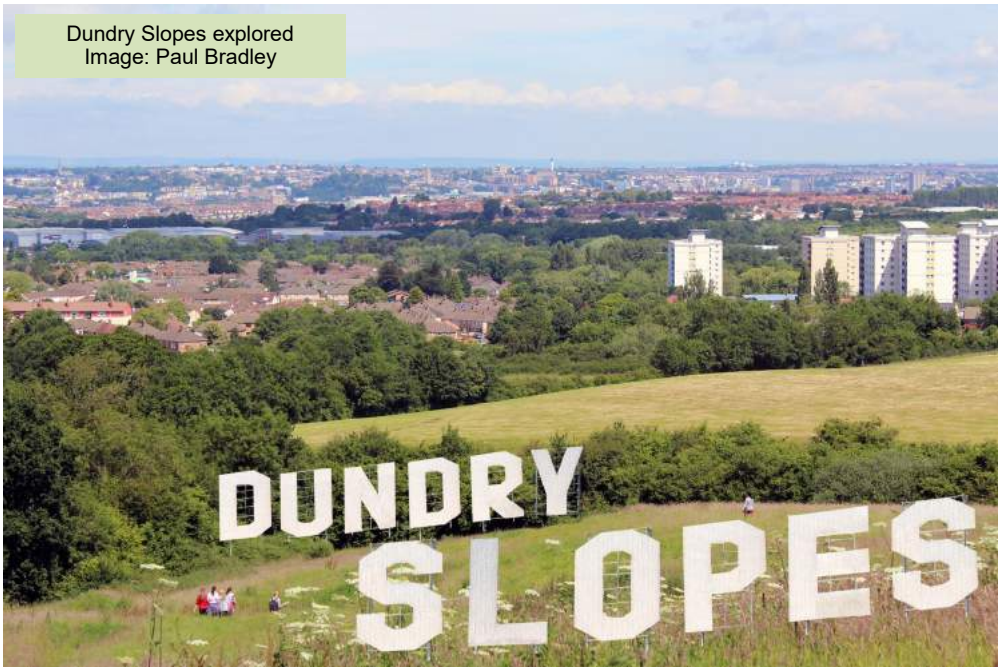
The Dundry Slopes Commission: adventures of curiosity and wonder

In 2015, Room 13 Hareclive won the Bristol Green Capital Neighbourhood Arts Commission for our area. The brief: to engage local and Bristol residents in the very under-used green space at the edges of south Bristol – Dundry Slopes. There were already community groups trying to do this through organised nature walks and conservation. Instead, inspired by the work of local and international artist Richard Long[5], our Patron, we proposed a new venture of discovery on the Slopes; one where the interests, questions, wonder, curiosity, imagination and pioneering spirit of local children would lead the way.

That summer, we set out together to explore the landscape in small groups and later in classes. Not through organised talks or work sheets, but through walking, clambering, climbing, talking to local residents and groups, looking at books and listening to stories and memories. In essence, through exploring, which then ignited a strong spark of interest, imagination and motivation to learn.

Dundry Slopes, a different way
Image: Shani Ali

What we discovered was a place of secret natural beauty, amazing views, wildlife and history; a peaceful, magical place, full of local stories, meaning and memory, where children used to play and couples court. And yet, a place where hardly anything in the landscape was named and few children or adults now went.



Dundry Slopes explored
Image: Paul Bradley

In response, we created a new map of Dundry Slopes[6]. All we discovered went into it. We named features and created trails of Curiosity and Wonder for others to explore, even taking other classes and groups of adults up there.

The children's work created new meaning and 'ways in' to the Slopes for them and for local people, as this short film[7] shows.

At the same time – in this age where children are less and less free to play out and explore wild green spaces, and increasingly pulled towards indoor, screen related pastimes –we also discovered important things about ourselves.

"I didn't think I could do this kind of thing but I can." – Lewis, 12

"I went up on the Slopes in my converse tracksuit and got mud all over me. I was cross then I realized the mud will wash out but the fun memories will stay." – Rhiannon,13

"…out of school I am a 'stay in your bedroom' kind of person. But through exploring the Dundry Slopes for this project I have discovered I like to take challenges and risks outside. I am now going to go for the Duke of Edinburgh Awards." – Lauren, 15

Creative Activism

In November 2015 we exhibited our work at the Arnolfini Light Studio[8]. But the Dundry Slopes work had also lit another spark: the joy of being free to explore outside and have our say. This eventually led to our collaborative work with Playing Out CIC on Safer Streets (2016) and the creation of our short film 'The Sad Reality'[9]. This has been shown at many public events and it's where our 'Let's Change Things' work really began.

Then came work with the University of Bristol, exploring the disconnection between Hartcliffe and the city centre and the barriers to getting there by bus (2018). We made our short film 'Now's The Time'[10], calling for free bus travel for children. This has also been screened at many events, generated local press coverage and fed into a House of Commons Select Committee. Children's creativity and voice… small quiet shifts beginning to happen.

Room 13 2020

Now in the dark days of November, following five months where most children had no school at all and all the many other challenges in their lives, we are back in the studio. So much of what used to freely happen in Room 13 is now not possible. Care around bubbles, equipment and the many necessary restrictions are paramount. But, those important seeds we spoke of – children's imagination and voice – can still be there. In fact, no matter how hard things are or what restrictions anyone has, these seeds can be there, where adults allow it. Right now we are talking about favourite animals, favourite environments. We are adding these to a collaborative collage started last year called 'You have the right to Dream'. Together we are building up a rich, diverse and beautiful world of possibilities on the canvas, until we can do more. In Room 13 we know that where these seeds exist, children can be positive and creative, and so hope exists, and the possibility of change.

Shani Ali, **Paul Bradley** and **Ingrid Skeels** are the adult members of the Room 13 Hareclive studio collective on the Hartcliffe estate, south Bristol.

More information: room13hareclive.org.uk

'You have the right to dream'
Image: Shani Ali

Mycelia Messages

Deb Wilenski

"We all come from a humungous fungus!" **– Thomas, age 5**

Reflections Small School in Worthing is small by anyone's standards. There are 24 children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2; two artist educators (Atelieristas), a Primary/Montessori Materials trained Teacher and a Pedagogical/Creative Lead. Directors and a Manager look after the school's organisation, and the children learn across five connected spaces: the Small School Ateliers, the Montessori Materials room, the school gardens, the local forest and beach.

From this small but specific ecology of people, places and creative practice, our emergent curriculum grows. 'Mycelia Messages' is a short documentary film from 2019-20 which shows this process in action. It follows the factual and fantastical journeys of a group of 4-7 year old children, as they discover and become obsessed with fungi.

Mushroom magic!

You'll see the children grow into expert mushroom hunters, recorders, identifiers and museum makers; mushroom milliners, clothes designers, fabricators and embroiderers. With the technical help of a DJ parent, an original soundtrack is laid down, including sounds made by actual mushrooms! All is brought together, back in the forest, in a brilliant 'Fungi Fashion' finale, with the children transformed into their favourite species.

Mushroom millinery

Mycelia Messages is a short film showing how the primary school curriculum can grow in adventurous and complex ways by beginning in the local outdoors.

Director: Martin Pace; Pedagogical Lead: Deb Wilenski

Educators: Georgia Yiapanis, Katie Brookes, Lauren White

reflectionsnurseries.co.uk/childrens-voices/films

Children's fabric designs

'Mycelia Messages' was part of a larger project exploring Community Ecology and the big idea of Balance. It brought together many ideas and strands of learning about the connections between humans, animals, plants and fungi. When five-year-old Thomas said *"We all come from a humungous fungus",* it was with amazement and authentic knowledge and we will use his brilliant words to begin our explorations of human culture in 2020/21.

.....

Deb Wilenski is pedagogical consultant at Reflections Nursery and Small School.

Creating the soundtrack

Lady veil mushroom made by children

Writing the future

Michael Judge

As an artist working with young people, mainly in theatre and across art-forms, I've always emphasised the power of creative writing. It feels important to invite young people to be authors of their own work and to write the story that only they can write. They are invited to be free in their imagination, to write whatever story they want to tell. To be an author is to be a person who brings something new into being. Combine this with an invitation to write about the future and you have a potent mix. Often it is local and personal actions that can be most powerful in the context of global challenges. This article gives a picture of how writing about the future offers imaginative freedom for children.

I am working as Associate Director for New International Encounter (NIE). NIE is a theatre company with offices in Cambridge and in Oslo. Our mission is to 'tell playful stories that connect us all.' The company does not present itself as 'activist' but we do focus on co-creating with young people. Inviting children to see themselves as artists, with the freedom to create, is a powerful tool for encouraging personal agency and activism.

In thinking about the co-creation process and my role working in partnership with schools, I often reference Paulo Freire, who articulates the political act of teaching in these words:

> *"The student needs to have full responsibility as an actor with knowledge, and not as a recipient of the teacher's discourse. In the final analysis this is the major political act of teaching. It is this which makes the progressive teacher different from the reactionary."*

The pressure on schools to deliver the national curriculum leaves limited space for discovery and for creativity, so this is an area where the arts have a powerful role, because otherwise creative acts are not valued.

The late Sir Ken Robinson, tireless champion of creativity, makes a point about the value of creative writing, not just in school, but in the world of academia: "*Why is it that in universities writing about novels is thought to be a higher calling than writing novels; or rather if writing novels is not thought to be intellectually valid, why is writing about them? What is going on here?"*

It's a difficult but exciting moment to be faced with a blank page. Adults find it hard as well as children. Actually, adults probably find it harder. When was the last time you were able to write whatever you wanted?

Unless you are a writer, that is. Children in schools can find it hard. This is in part because the current education system is prescriptive, and teachers do not feel they have permission to create open-ended tasks. However, often it is liberating, and produces exciting results.

NIE runs a co-creation programme with schools in Cambridge and writing and storytelling are key elements of this. One of these programmes, in partnership with theatre companies in six other European countries, invited 3000 children to write about the future in fifty years' time. The project[11] was targeted at children 7-12 years old. When we first met to plan the workshops, we chose not to lead with themes like climate change, for example. We wanted the children to have the freedom to write whatever they wanted. The theme was the future, yes, but they were free to imagine it as they wanted. The stories that were written had a varied range but there were, alongside stories of robots taking over the world, a significant number of stories that spoke of the need for humanity to produce less waste. In the context of environmental justice, some of the children chose to write about saving the planet, not because that was the theme of the project, but because that was the story they saw in the future.

In Fifty Years Time
The world is a magical place
Animals will speak
And humans will be able to fly
Wishes will come true
The world is a funnier place
Adventures on the doorstep
The impossible will happen
Friendships play an important role
If you have troubles, you can reconcile
Nature will recover and
Underwater worlds are discovered
Slowly with time
Mythical creatures arise
In the summer,
It will not be too warm
And in the winter
It will not be too cold
Fights no longer known
No talk of anger
Mysterious sounds
Letters will float.
No one gets wet
You can circle the world very fast if you want
If you really want.

Poem by Lea, Nuremberg

Our current project is very local to Cambridge, set in Cherry Hinton Hall Park. The project began with a school trip to the park. We don't yet know how this project will end, as lockdown interrupted, but we will ensure that the children are free to be as creative as possible and to take responsibility for how they see the world and how, potentially, they might change it.

Michael Judge has been working with young people and theatre for 20 years. He has worked as an Associate for the Royal Opera House, Theatre Centre and Dundee Rep and with the British Council in Brazil. He is currently Associate Director at New International Encounter (NIE) theatre, an award-winning theatre company based in Cambridge and Oslo where he co-creates projects and shows both with and for young people.

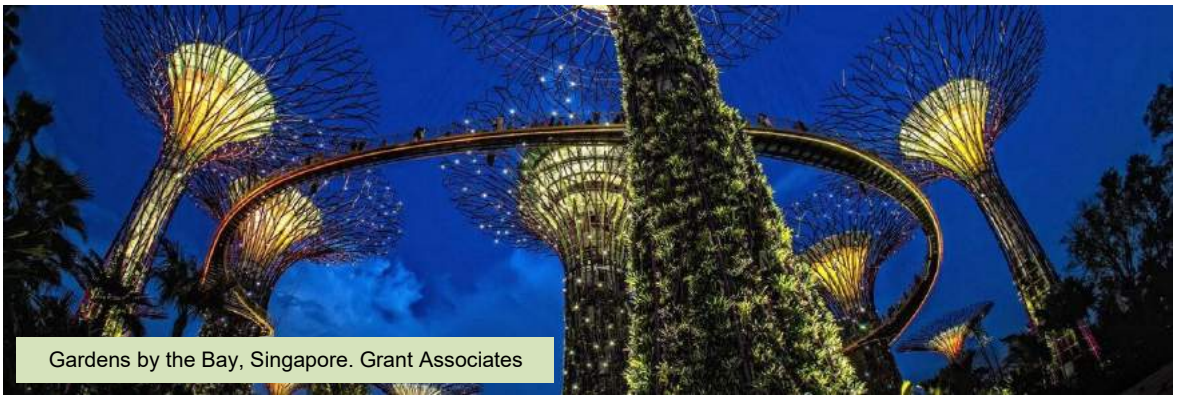
More information: talesfromtheedgeoftown.com; nie-theatre.com.

Forest of Imagination

Dr Penny Hay

Forest of Imagination is a metaphor for our collective imagination. Forest of Imagination brings art, creativity, imagination and nature into the heart of a city with sublime natural and immersive interventions. The Forest brings nature and creativity to the heart of the public realm and highlights the urgency of climate change.

Co-founded by Grant Associates (Andrew Grant is renowned for the Super Trees, Gardens by the Bay in Singapore) and House of Imagination, Forest of Imagination is a unique collaboration between the creative and cultural industries and the community of Bath that has grown out of a collective ambition to make a difference in the city. It is a manifestation of creative activism.



Gardens by the Bay, Singapore. Grant Associates

Since 2014, Forest of Imagination has each year reimagined a familiar space to inspire everyone's creativity and heighten a sense of nature in an urban environment. Every year, Forest of Imagination draws on local skills, inspiration and ingenuity and engages a wide public audience.

Making creativity visible

Forest of Imagination is a contemporary and participatory arts event that makes creativity visible in the city and engages new audiences with contemporary arts and design through a learning programme involving artists and creative professionals. Forest of Imagination deliberately brings the inspirational experience and sensations of nature and wildness to our doorsteps. Key themes of the Forest of Imagination include our connectedness to the natural environment, climate change, creativity and wellbeing. Forest of Imagination highlights the importance of environmental education and environmental stewardship.

Forest of Imagination, 2019

Forest of Imagination is based on a new way of experiencing nature in a city environment, in which the city becomes a place for new approaches to learning, with sustainability at its centre. Forest invites children and adults to explore, make and learn in an imaginative way, engaging with a thought-provoking series of experiences for all ages. Learning outside the classroom, with the city as campus, invites a new space for conversations about our collective imagination.

Future Forest

Forest of Imagination invites the possibility of curating the blue and green of a city landscape to create spaces of inspiration and contemplation. The Forest inspires meaningful engagement with wildness to feed our imagination and creativity. Imagine every city with an integrated and inspirational landscape at its heart, bringing the experience of nature to its citizens' doorsteps.

Natureculture

This vibrant engagement exemplifies natureculture (Haraway 2003[12]) in direct response to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Forest of Imagination encourages everyone to rethink their relationship with nature and to co-create responses, experiences and exchanges that open up a space of dialogue around the role of imagination. We want to demonstrate the importance of nature by integrating creative, inclusive and interdisciplinary pedagogic approaches (Capra & Luisi 2014[13]). David Orr's (1992[14]) notion of ecological literacy encourages the recognition of connectedness between human wellbeing and the health of natural systems. We are aiming to co-design eco-creative approaches to teaching and learning that empower local communities, young people and adults to create positive change for future generations (Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles et al 2020[15]).

Forest is the home of Imagination

"Forest is the home of Imagination. Imagination is everyone. Forest of Imagination is a place where everyone can explore their own creativity. It offers a re-imagining of a familiar space into a fantastical world to inspire intuitive play, imaginative thought and to heighten a sense of nature in the city. Part landscape, part city, part gallery, the Forest engages everyone in a seriously playful and alternative experience of nature, contemporary art, landscape and architecture. The Forest is a wild place, a metaphorical retreat from the everyday urban world, with delight and darkness, colour and light, re-purposed, natural and intelligent materials, to share the innate creativity of human nature."

– Andrew Grant, Landscape Architect, Co-founder Forest of Imagination.

This year our forest work was different because of the pandemic. Being actively creative in 2020's virtual forest was a lifeline to many – together we have witnessed extraordinary creativity emerge from a crisis. Forest of Imagination is an opportunity to help us think differently about the way we conceive our imagination. We want to engage with contemporary creativity, imagine new possibilities for the way we live and create thoughtful and imaginative spaces for everyone to enjoy. We believe this can enhance wellbeing and transform lives, communities, cities and economies. Forest of Imagination can act as a liminal space between the concrete and the abstract, the home of imagination.

Dr Penny Hay is an artist and educator. Her roles include Reader in Creative Teaching and Learning and Senior Lecturer in Arts Education, School of Education and Centre for Cultural and Creative Industries, Bath Spa University and Director of Research, House of Imagination.

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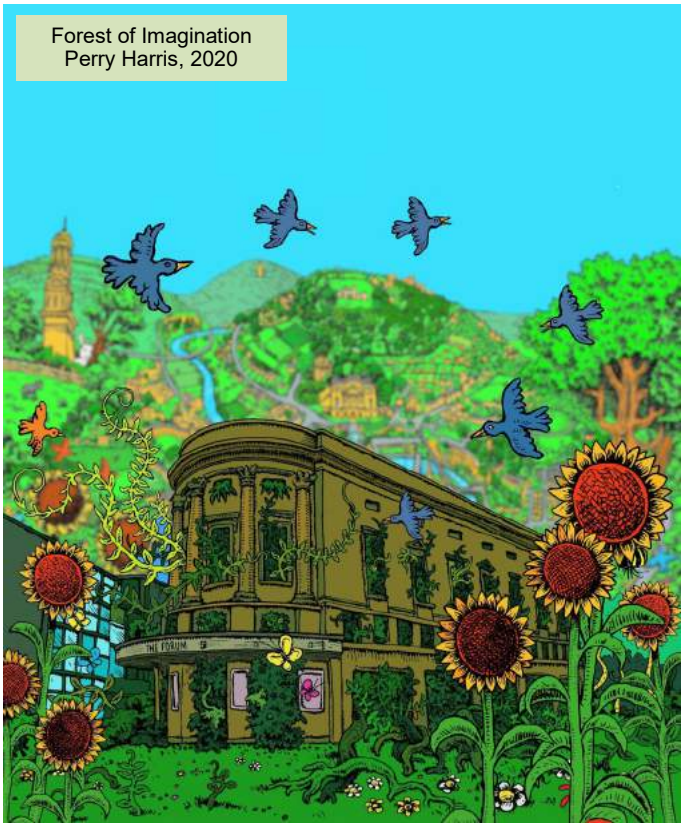
More information:
houseofimagination.org



Forest of Imagination
Perry Harris, 2020

The art of creative care

Sally Todd & Hilary Cox Condron

Making 'The Wonder of a Pebble' online in lockdown, Hilary (left) and Sally (right), spring 2020.

We are Cambridge based artists with a shared passion for the natural world, as both a powerful stimulus for the imagination and as a restorative space for wellbeing. Our work often uses natural or found materials and addresses themes about the changing landscape and the need to protect and cherish our local environment and wildlife.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, we have attuned more than ever to the wonder on our doorsteps... impossibly blue skies, reflections in puddles, amplified birdsong... Spending time outside in nature has proved indispensable.

As well as our individual art practices, in theatre and visual art, we have also worked for many years as artist facilitators, supporting and enabling individuals from all backgrounds and ages to connect with, and develop, their own creative expression. We work in schools, museums, cultural centres and increasingly in outside spaces such as woods, nature reserves, parks and even cemeteries, inviting people to engage more closely with the natural environment by spending time in creative exploration outdoors.

This work is usually very hands-on; so, amidst the stressful and challenging new experience of lockdown, we have had to adapt our practice. We have learnt new skills, exploring and developing ways to connect whilst socially distanced.

'Earth Water' January 2020.
Cyanotype. Sally Todd

Rangoli inspired doorstep drawing. October 2020. Sally Todd

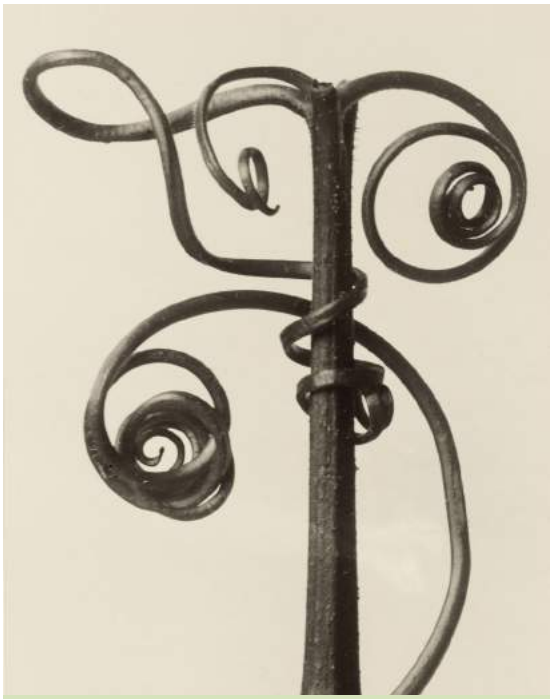
Each invitation was shaped by our own art practice and the four in the series we put together took their cues from the nature on our doorstep: *The Wonder of a Pebble; What Makes a Place?; Patterns in Nature;* and *Making it Move.* They encouraged people to step outside and respond with all their senses to the fragile beauty of their immediate world: *Find a small stone, either on your daily walk, or in your garden or visualise one from your imagination. Place it in your home. Enjoy its presence, imagine its journey over time and what elements may have formed that stone. Tell the story of your pebble and create a response in any way you choose; a drawing, sculpture, poem?* ….. and so on.

We have particularly wanted to reach vulnerable and isolated young people, supporting them to stay creative and connected with their local surroundings. Sharing the joy and healing power of nature, and nurturing this connection through creativity and cultural expression, have felt important roles for us to play: for ourselves, our communities and for our environment.

'Autumn Palette' October 2020. Hilary Cox Condron

Together with Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination and their partners on the Creative Care Programme commissioned by the FullScope consortia, we worked with three fellow artists and devised a creative offer. This took the form of a box of art materials that we posted to individuals and families, together with a series of 'Invitations to Create'. Mindful that some children may not even have a pencil, we chose simple yet open-ended materials that offered the potential for a myriad of uses and expression – paper, a bottle of drawing ink, colourful pastels and street chalks, string, luggage labels, a nature slide and a pencil too.

We also offered references to other artists who have inspired and informed our own practice as makers over the years, such as the German sculptor and pioneering photographer Karl Blossfeldt, with his beautiful magnified photographs revealing the mystery and wonder of common plants, and the outsider artist and village postman Ferdinand Cheval who, after stumbling over an odd stone on his daily round, was so inspired that he went on to create the fantastical 'Palais Ideal'. This extraordinary artwork was built over three decades from stones as a homage to both nature and the meeting of different cultures from all around the world.



'Cucurbita - Pumpkin tendrils enlarged 3.6 times' 1928. Karl Blossfeldt

Palais Ideal',1879-1912, Ferdinand Cheval

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Palais_ideal_-_Hauterives.JPEG

We sent these gentle provocations to people to help them find solace and creative inspiration in the natural environment around them, using familiar artist strategies of sustained and active looking, playing with volume and scale, de-familiarising what we think we know and re-imagining alternative possibilities though creative experimentation and representation. Our intention was to offer some sense of grounding and consolation during this difficult time. We made short films too, to offer something of the personal and experimental qualities we would usually share in face-to-face workshops. Each time we acknowledged the importance of offering the box and invitations as a gift, without any expectation in return from the recipients, but rather as a gesture of support and connectivity in what has become a remote online existence.

Whilst so many of us have felt overwhelmed and vulnerable during 2020, we are learning from feedback gathered to date how taking this time to create and slowing down for a moment can strengthen and support people. The staff we have collaborated with at Centre 33, a young person's mental health charity based in Cambridge, have described how this emphasis on creativity and creative practice have helped them think about their own wellbeing in new ways as well as offering them another focus for their conversations with the young people they are working with.

> *"We speak with young people really struggling to cope. This project is a great way for them to engage in an activity which helps them to focus on their wellbeing in an enjoyable and creative way. It can also be a really helpful tool to help us to engage with them whilst they are awaiting further interventions for their mental health or emotional wellbeing."*
>
> – Lucy, Engagement and Support Project Worker

A recent iteration for the Creative Care programme we have worked on has been to mentor three young artists from The Kite Trust, the LGBT+ charity for our region, through their collaborative venture to select materials and design resources for families with younger children supported by the charity. Noah, Riley and Mars called this *Outside the Box* and their three invitations are each rooted in their identity and exploring the world around them.

> *"I wanted to get involved in this project as I find art to be incredibly therapeutic and hoped my contribution could help others explore their queerness through art. I've had lots of fun coming up with my offer and thinking about how nature supports us in our day-to-day life."* – Noah

Kite Trust box and invites

We may be distanced, but picking up a pebble and remembering we are all under one sky, can bring us together. Sharing joy and feeling a little more hopeful as we connect not only with each other but with our natural world has a renewed urgency, whilst nurturing the imagination to envisage new ways of living, is equally vital.

Hilary Cox Condron is a socially engaged artist, passionate about using creativity, culture, stories and collaboration to connect, strengthen and shape communities.

Sally Todd is a visual artist, film maker and theatre practitioner, and a founding member artist with Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination.

More information: cambridgecandi.org.uk/projects/reimagine/creative-care

Artwork created remotely by Centre 33 staff in response to 'The Wonder of a Pebble' invitation

Eco-capabilities: supporting children's wellbeing through arts in nature

Dr Nicola Walshe and Zoe Moula

A rapidly growing body of research shows the benefits – happiness, vitality, and life satisfaction – associated with access to nature and green spaces. Indeed the recent survey by Natural England, which aimed to understand the perspective of children and young people relating to nature during Covid-19, demonstrated the positive role of nature in supporting children's wellbeing, with eight in every ten children agreeing that being in nature made them very happy (Natural England, 2020[16]). Despite this, in the last 30 years the number of children regularly playing in wild places in the UK fell by 90% (Natural Childhood Report: Moss, 2012[17]) and children living in areas of high deprivation are significantly less likely to have access to green spaces. Furthermore the World Health Organisation recently released a report citing over 3000 global studies demonstrating how creativity and engagement with the arts play a major role in the promotion of health and health management across the lifespan (Fancourt and Finn, 2019[18]). However, despite this increasing evidence concerning both nature and the arts, what is missing from the research-base so far is how the interconnectedness of these two factors – nature and the arts – impacts on health and wellbeing, particularly in childhood (Walshe, Lee and Smith, 2020[19]). This is the gap we are addressing through the Eco-capabilities research project.

Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Eco-capabilities project aims to explore how children's wellbeing can be supported through working with artists in nature and outdoor places, in and around school grounds. We take an innovative approach to wellbeing, drawing on Sen's (1980[20]) work on capabilities to explore wellbeing from the perspective of children, in particular asking them to define what is important to them for living a good life (or flourishing) through environmental sustainability, social justice and future economic wellbeing (what we term *eco-capabilities*). The research focuses on the nature-based interventions of our project partner, arts and wellbeing charity Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination (CCI), exploring how and to what extent working with CCI artists can address the disconnection of some children from outdoor places that they find difficult to engage with and, thereby, support their wellbeing.

During the project more than 100 Key Stage 2 primary school students will come together alongside their teachers, artists, and researchers, for eight days of creative adventuring in nature (or *artscaping*), followed by a number of community events. These creative and participatory workshops will take place once a week in two schools in areas of relatively high socio-economic deprivation in eastern England; this is particularly important, given evidence suggesting that children and young people living in such areas are significantly less likely to have access to both nature and the arts. Through their artscaping, children will be invited to explore and reconnect with local spaces, within and beyond the school. An important component of the project is to work closely with teachers to ensure that creative adventuring in outdoor spaces can be a sustainable practice even after the completion of this study.

Eco-Capabilities started in schools in March 2020. Although we almost immediately had to pause because of the changing context of Covid-19, we were able to deliver one-day workshops in both schools aiming to explore children's perceptions of wellbeing through drawings of their 'happy places', group discussion and 'walk and talk' focus groups. What became clear on analysis of this initial data was that access to, and the appreciation of, nature and outdoor spaces was fundamental for children's wellbeing, linking directly to their emotional, mental, physical, and material wellbeing. In children's drawings, representations of nature and outdoor spaces received most attention among all other themes (in 56 out of 91 drawings). Access to such spaces appeared to allow children to slow down and appreciate life as they can 'see and smell the blossoms and the flowers', 'look at the blue sky', or 'see the rivers that make nice sounds'. Children also expressed a sense of responsibility towards nature, for example stating 'we need to plant and feed more trees, plants and flowers' and 'to protect our environment'. Some children also mentioned that outdoor spaces inspire them to be 'creative' and 'adventurous'.

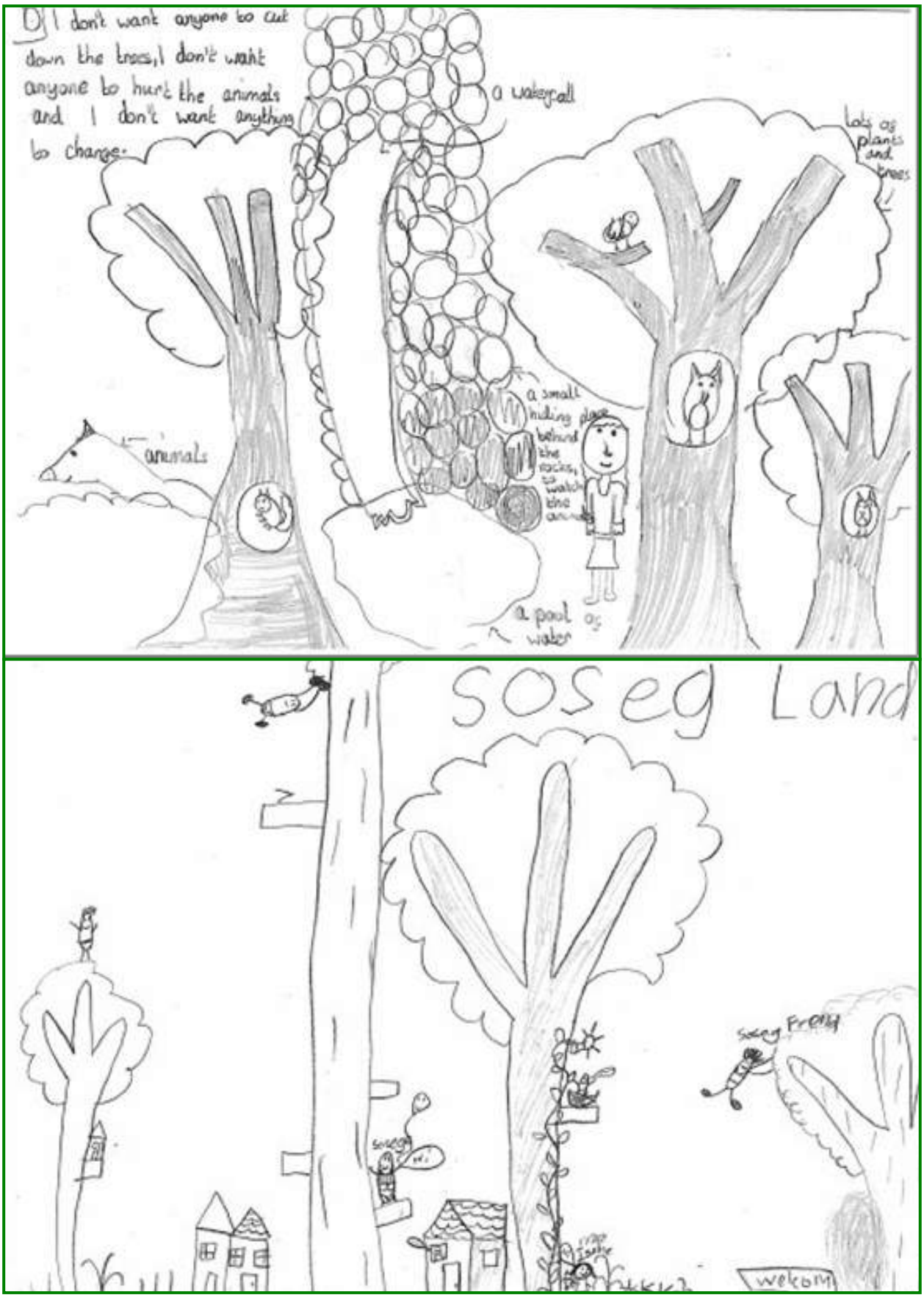
Teachers, researchers and artists from the Eco-Capabilities project practice artscaping in Milton Road Cemetery on the project launch day, March 2020

The beginning of Eco-Capabilities and the artscaping days in early 2021 will aim to create the space that children described as important for their wellbeing, a space within the natural environment where they can be creative and adventurous. We will explore how, and why, child-nature connectedness can be enhanced through the arts. This is especially timely following the profound effects that school closures and social isolation measures have

had, and may continue to have, on children's lives. Given that The Children's Society report (2020[21]) stated that 1.1 million children in the UK said they feel unhappy with their lives since the Covid-19 crisis, we believe that re-connection with nature and engagement with the arts for all children is more important than ever.

Dr Nicola Walshe is Acting Head of the School of Education and Social Care at Anglia Ruskin University. **Zoe Moula** is a postdoctoral research fellow investigating the impact of arts and arts therapies for children's health & wellbeing.

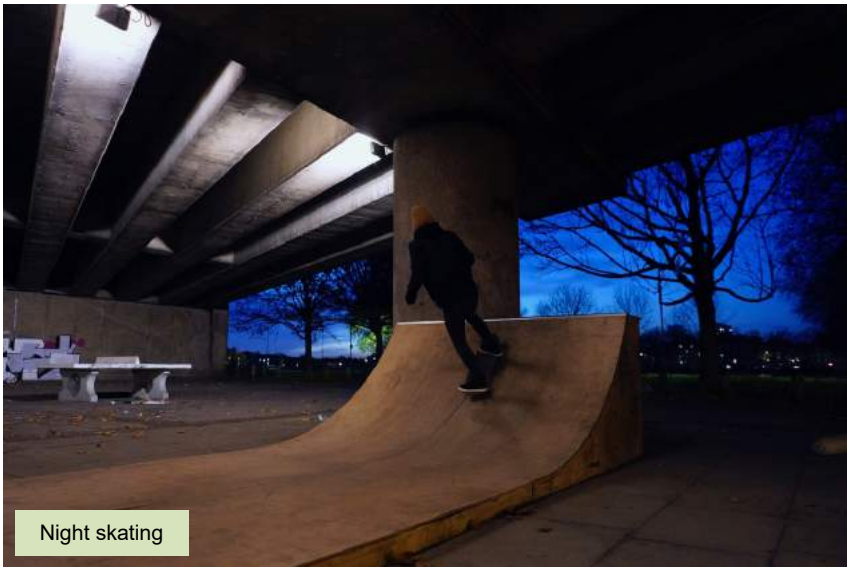
More information: cambridgecandi.org.uk/projects/reimagine/ecocapabilities



Children's drawings of their *happy place* illustrating a range of representations of nature and the environment.

City Mill Skate: creative urban placemaking in lockdown

Esther Sayers



Night skating

City Mill Skate is a creative consultation with skateboarders to determine the design of skateable obstacles at UCL East, the new campus for University College London on the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, London. Commissioned by UCL Culture, this is inclusive placemaking and active cultural engagement; aimed at exploring and engaging with skater led initiatives in the area and involving young skateboarders in envisioning the kinds of architecture that they would like to use in the future.

Crucially, it is research in action, using approaches that allow for the materiality of design processes and social models for evaluating the success of the designs. Data are gathered through a combination of participatory design, questionnaires, qualitative interviews and live evaluation by research participants. Through these methods, we want to improve our understanding of the public who will skate the future City Mill Skate sites.

How we share and invest in our public spaces says a lot about the society in which we live. A community coming together to invest time in making common land better for everyone is a powerful narrative. This is a tale of creative placemaking, impactful because it engages young people in the process of urban renewal. Such community engagement is not simply about teaching someone to become an active citizen, but about enabling people to come together to invest in their communities.

Changes to the urban environment that nurture ownership and belonging have infinitely more sustainability than off-the-shelf regeneration. A Do-It-Yourself (DIY) approach has always been a part of skateboarding: making adjustments to existing architecture, fixing degraded surfaces.

These interventions are imperceptible to non-skateboarders, and they are usually done without the explicit 'permission' of governing authorities (Kazi-Tani, 2014[22]). Arguing about 'what public space is and should be is a rite of passage for skateboarders' (Howell, 2005[23]).

During lockdown we sent out skate dot making kits. Originally intended as face-to-face workshops, these kits were an adjustment to enable us to carry on doing this research in a socially distanced way. So many experiences in lockdown were digital, it was important to provide an alternative, a way of thinking and designing with materials.

Skate dots

A skate dot is an architectural object that is skateable; more incidental than a skate park, less 'in the wild' than a skate spot. Something similar to a sculpture on a sculpture trail, it is rideable by skateboarders, but also by roller skaters, BMX riders and adaptive skaters.

During the pilot phase, focus groups took place in cafes adjacent to skateparks. Researchers and participants talked and skated together at skate sites in the vicinity of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.

A skate dot model made by City Mill Skate research participant @Thom Harrison. Its form is based on a bar of soap which references the area's nineteenth century history as a soap factory.

There is a sensory experience that comes from making with stuff, rather than just designing in theory. And that echoes the experience of skateboarding where the physical act of riding overlays the understanding of a trick in theory – you have to experience the feeling of riding through your body. In the designs, surface quality, height and accessibility are all important, as well as elegant shapes and structures that sit, not within endless acres of concrete, but within a planted landscape.

We are gathering testimony from the skate dot makers and will bring their models to life by building some obstacles to allow us all to skate and evaluate their designs.

Participatory design

The DIY ethos is important to this creative process of design. Key to its success is its being a local project in which skaters' active involvement is sought alongside professional fabricators. This process is supported in different ways by events that enable co-design, DIY build events and skate and evaluate sessions. Activities are oriented towards 'doing' and 'seeing' things differently to generate interest and engagement within communities.

What is vital is that all skate dots are designed by riders with riding in mind; ideas must come from all sections of the skate community, including adaptive skaters, roller skaters and BMX riders as well as from the wide mix of ethnicities, gender and age categories who form the contemporary urban skateboarding community.

Placemaking presents problems of how to engage with new publics and communities; not by inserting those 'outside' the existing order into it, but as a more disruptive process that gives participants a voice in spaces where they had not previously been heard. This approach grows out of creative art practice, empowering young people to act as cultural ambassadors and teachers. It speaks to Page's (2020[24]) notion of pedagogical praxis by giving young people the opportunity to understand who they are in relation to where they are.

In neighbourhoods bordering the City Mill Skate site, the right to public space is becoming increasingly transactional through a plethora of coffee shops and the sale of commodified lifestyle leisure (Sayers & Griffin, 2020[25]). Our pilot research has shown that skateboarders are already reclaiming unused local spaces on the periphery of the recently redeveloped Olympic Park, for their own leisure. The appropriation of public space under a flyover makes useless space useful through the skateboarders' habitation; an alternative space without commercial value, sited away from zones of gentrification.

Skateboarding can be used as a positive catalyst for local young people seeking to construct an identity outside of the structures of consumer exchange. It allows them to create a sense of self as individuals, but also in cohesive groups. It provides an inclusive alternative in which they can influence and change the culture of their local area.

City Mill Skate is led by Dr Esther Sayers and Sam Griffin both researchers, artists and themselves skateboarders. They are working with UCL Culture, the Bartlett School of Architecture, Urban Lab and the east London skateboarding community to develop, test and ultimately create a range of skateable architectural elements to be embedded into UCL East's social spaces.

CITY MILL SKATE

Esther Sayers is Head of MA Arts and Learning Programme and Senior Lecturer in Education, Goldsmiths University.

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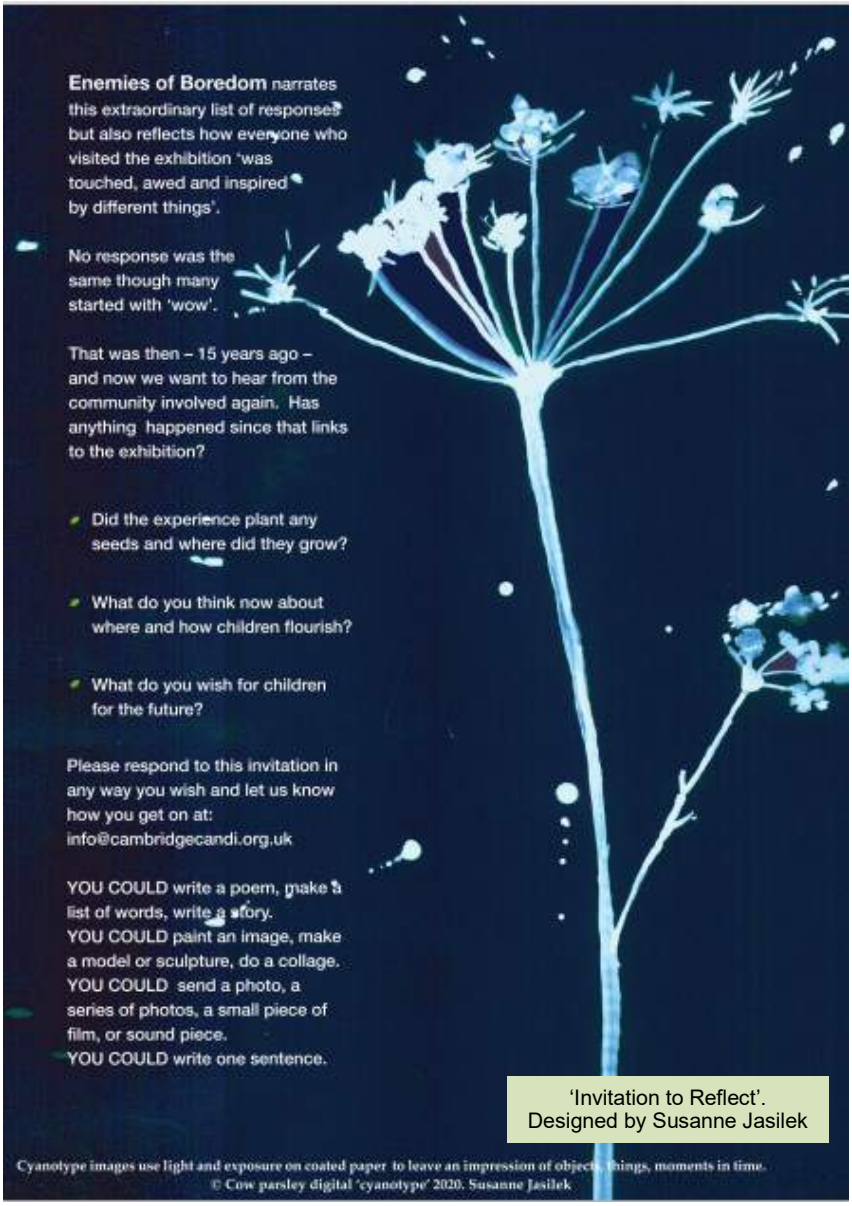
Liberated learning: from pockets of resistance to imaginary spaces and back again

Gabrielle Arenge & Emily Dowdeswell

"During 2020 hard questions are being asked about the world we want our children and young people to grow up in and how their education should be structured to support this. Brilliantly children are leading the way and often we find ourselves watching in awe at their articulacy and passion.
How can we work alongside them and support change?
What do we know already to be important for children and their communities?
What must we not forget?" – Ruth Sapsed

Sixteen years ago, before CCI even became a charity, a group of artists, teachers and other educators, organisers and researchers, including the founding members of Re-Focus Cambridge [a group of practitioners who had visited Reggio and wanted to share their experiences and inspirations], were invited by Robin Duckett, director of Sightlines Initiative[26], to host the world-famous exhibit from Reggio Emilia 'The 100 Languages of Children' in Cambridge. Since then, many who led, organised and facilitated the rich programme of events during the exhibit and of course, visited it, have carried forward the work, its ideas, values and ways of being made so gloriously visible in the exhibit. In a year of heightened change, we were inspired to reconnect with this community, to celebrate how we can continue to create learning spaces where children and communities flourish. Fifteen colleagues wandered with us through memory, experiences, and visions for the future in meandering musings.



'Invitation to Reflect'.
Designed by Susanne Jasilek

Our conversations started with a provocation and an open, uncertain path forward. *Did the exhibition plant any seeds and, if so, where did they grow?* Whilst pockets of practice around the country still embody the gutsy creativity and curiosity exemplified by the exhibition, wider educational, political, and ecological landscapes are locked into a counter movement and are largely resistant to these playful yet purposeful ways of being. Our community spoke of a rich diversity of experiences. Voices connected, overlapped, moved in parallel and then twisted into different directions, but all were still a part of the same web. These conversations reminded us of the creative learning possibilities, places, and processes that already exist and the visions for those that still could be. We wanted to ensure that our response to these musings was not passive, but, like the exhibit itself, a generative opening, rooted in our shared past of thoughtful, principled work with young children.

Serendipitously, the Journal of Imaginary Research[27] was accepting submissions of new short fictional pieces on the theme of *a utopian, a hopeful, a better future* for their annual volume produced each November to celebrate Academic Writing Month. A key aim of the journal is to encourage academic colleagues to embrace writing simply for enjoyment, as an act of care, or as a reflective act.

We felt this open-ended prompt aligned with a way of being and thinking that sought careful provocations and minimal instructions. Like a typical CCI workshop, the fictional abstract allowed us to go out into our wonderful conversations, collect bits and bring them into the container of an imaginary text. We share the abstract here [see next page] because, as the editors of the Journal described, sometimes it is the little acts of hope and imagination that are the most resonant.

The abstract, pointing to the tensions we experience in our practice, both reminds us of our accumulated wisdom and illuminates the potential for humans, all humans, to communally generate compassionate, organic relationships with their ecosystems where difference

and justice flourish. There is a sense of loss that is as palpable now as it was at the time of the exhibit. But our colleagues have reminded us that we can reflect on all that we know and all we have experienced. We can, and we have, overcome challenges together through dialogue and pockets of creative resistance.

The abstract signposts a wish to lift our shared hopes without erasing the lingering sadness of lost opportunities. Our reflective journey to imaginary spaces and back again, reminds us of the possibilities that lie within – possibilities that are liberated by the permission and freedom to drive our own playful learning.

Liberated learning: Discoveries from traversing the multiverse

Young humans traverse infinite open-ended learning environments throughout Antellia Regalo, a recently discovered parallel, alternate universe. Unexpectedly, the sharing and exchange of simple materials and carefully calibrated provocations lead to utterly shocking outcomes. This paper focuses on how in the multiverse young humans engage across multiple realities without fitting into the envelopes of experience that crystallised systems dictate. Impermanent, asymmetrical, and unmanaged learning resists instruction and becomes productive.

The possibility of pockets of resistance to old conventions in schooling had previously been the focus of discussions betwixt activists, artists, and educators. Contemporaneous literature suggests that treating the idea of a 'classroom' lightly might allow educators to listen more closely and pay greater attention to what young humans are exploring. Previous experimental research has further demonstrated that young humans develop their own languages of learning if given opportunities to use found materials freely and inhabit loosely choreographed spaces with ample time to roam and return.

Here we present the in-situ analyses of how young humans flourish in infinitely wonky, beautifully different, and communally crafted open-ended environments, particularly forests, fields, and unruly artscapes. Results from DeepListening analysis show that these spaces reject hierarchy and facilitate generosity. Young humans gather together and continuously amplify the acoustics of their landscape, wherever and whatever it is. The expansive open-ended environments for wonder and exploration offer intimate space where one can be simultaneously lost and found, challenged and nurtured, and liberated and supported. The freedom found in Antellia Regalo has wider ontological importance and potential generalisability across the multiverse for how different species structure learning around places of comfort and chaos. Ultimately this raises the vital question, "what are we doing down here - and why?"

With thanks to Anna Townley, Filipa Pereira-Stubbs, Idit Nathan, Issam Kourbaj, Jane Chudleigh, Karl Foster, Mandy Swann, Mary Connor, Mary Jane Drummond, Paula Ayliffe, Penny Hay, Robin Duckett, Ruth Sapsed, Sally Todd, Sharon Honig, and Sue Bainbridge.

Gabrielle Arenge is a doctoral student at the University of Cambridge's Faculty of Education where she is researching the processes and catalysts of pedagogic change in Botswana primary schools. She enjoys wandering through woods, playing with words, and building with clay.

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Emily Dowdeswell is a doctoral student at the Open University's Faculty of Wellbeing, Education, Language and Sport where she is researching children's perspectives of fun and learning in their everyday classrooms. She enjoys the company of children, reading lots of words and listening to stories.

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Mud and good companionship

Robin Duckett

"We just realised how absolutely brilliant mud is!"

The educators at Walkergate Early Years Centre in Newcastle had been venturing into a woodland pre-school one recent spring and mud had been a big feature. The 'mud-ludder' children jump and squelch in it, getting stuck, feeling it, moulding it, churning it, finding worms.

This is all part of the lovely mix of exploring, climbing, collecting, and making dens. Sticks can be living, dead, dry, wet, brittle, rotten, strong, long, for helping, carrying, building, sticks with fungus on, sociable sticks, power sticks. They are limbs from the trees the children were playing amongst, in the mud, down where the mud monster scared and fascinated them and was their friend. The leaves and pine-cones, feathers, all with their insistent tales of mystery and imagination, are waiting to be picked up, interpreted, re-told, re-invented, with a deftness of curiosity that connected children to one another and with the world all around them.

Back at nursery, lucky children, they explore again inside and outside with clay, soil, compost, in the natural and vibrant ways of exploration and exchange they'd naturally moved with in the woods. Why lucky? They had good companions, who made time and space for them, their interests and the mud.

It isn't always the case that adults in education are ready, willing and able to see and respond to the simple enthusiasm of their children.

Inside connected with outside

Our children spend too much time inside, separated from the world, but nevertheless the domestic shelter of the classroom can be a good place, so long as it relates to the primary experience and stuff of the world. Space outside, whether woodland or nursery garden, seems to be the place for relationships, exchange, delving and exploration, it is after all our elemental home. The inside space, the classroom, seems more the place of reflection, recall and imagination, alongside the sensory encounter with materials. Here materials have a life away from their home, in this artificial, domestic, studio space.

Being there

Working with elemental materials reduces our dangerous adult cultural separateness from the living, sentient world and brings the possibility of a better understanding and alignment in our children. There is an inborn sense of wonder; an easy, rewarding sense to nurture.

This is not simply a matter of stuff, it is a matter of speed and intent. Tasks, goals and achievement need repetitiveness, efficient ways of doing things, lowest-common-denominator simplicity.

Enquiry needs fascination and engagement; a different understanding of time. The point is not to get somewhere else, but to be exactly where you are, switching on senses, thoughts and feelings. To be good companions with children, we need to rekindle, to cultivate in ourselves, the habit of walking in the unknown – and listening. Carlina Rinaldi[28] refers to a pedagogy of listening: listening not to what we expect or even seek, but to what is, what we see; to listen to ourselves listening.

Sometimes we are encouraged to 'think outside the box' but can we more courageously learn to be aware that the box itself is a figment of our imagining: it does not really exist at all anyway. Step out of the box, walk a few paces, turn around – pam!: the box simply isn't there any more. Can we notice the complexities of the forest instead; learn to live and be amongst the trees?

Can we 'good companions' learn to cultivate this being in complexity? Can we encourage children's natural sense of enquiry in which thought, feelings and senses are passionately engaged? We talk of 'researching the children who are researching the world'. We need to be ready and to make our settings ready for their researchfulness.

We need to learn to get off the beaten path, to walk off the track and into the woods. It took me years to walk off the track, to remember, to decide to let my feet follow inclination, to dare. But once you walk into the woods, wait and let the woods come to you. It is not a matter of being lost but of being there, being in uncertainty. I do not mean being tremulous, indecisive, lost, fearful: it is being ready to listen well, without needing to explain or dissect, to be 'in tune', so that senses naturally attune to the patterns, the orders, intricacies and relationships of the world. We are ourselves, animated, vibrant, rhythmic, perceiving and related to other animated, vibrant, rhythmic, people around us.

I think this is something of the vital 'sense of wonder' of which Rachel Carson[29] writes so eloquently, and which we cannot have if we separate ourselves from sticks, leaves, feathers, shells, clay, water, wood, wool, stones …or from air, mountains, woods, rivers, fields, seas.

There are simple, humane starting points from which to imagine and create educative spaces in which children can explore and learn in joyful, vibrant, meaningful ways. If we choose, we can focus on making places which speak of the 'pulsing of life': places which celebrate our encounters with the stuff of the world.

Robin Duckett is Director of Sightlines Initiative, following ten years as a nursery teacher. He is at home in sun and rain, woods and mountains.

More information: sightlines-initiative.com

Creative environmental projects

Gabrielle Back

‘Around the World’ project

The ‘Around the World Creative Environmental Project 2020/21’ focused on climate change. The project featured a schools competition and students were invited to research climate change and its effects on the environment and wildlife. They were then asked to produce creative work in the form of collages and mosaics to depict images of their findings.

Numerous schools participated and some of the work has been featured in a virtual gallery organized by Hills Radio. All submissions will be displayed as part of an extensive ‘Around the World’ exhibition at Holy Trinity Broadgate Coventry as soon as is possible and Covid-19 restrictions are lifted. The mosaics are from the winning Baginton Fields School, Coventry.

The winning mosaics from Baginton Fields School, Coventry. Images: Gabrielle Back

‘Plastic Pollution’ competition

The aim of the Plastic Pollution competition was to raise young people’s awareness of plastic pollution through research leading to designing a poster and/or models using plastic waste. The submitted work was exhibited in Holy Trinity church, Coventry between June & December 2019. Church guides estimated that some 10,000 people had seen the artwork and read the pupils’ explanations by the time the exhibition closed.

Displays of artwork from the Plastic Pollution Competition 2019. Images: Nina Hatch

Gabrielle Back has been involved in NAEE since the early days. She was General Secretary for over a decade and Chair of the Association several times. She is now a Trustee and Community Ambassador.

Gabrielle is the founder and Chair of the charity **Savers**, which works with schools and community groups on environmental projects to raise awareness of environmental sustainability and protection.

Gabrielle also chairs the Rotary Great Britain & Ireland Environmental Sustainability Group and is District Environment Officer for Heart of England District 1060.

Artist Interview: William Ritchie

Henricus Peters

'The Fireman'
William Ritchie, 2017

A former scientist with a PhD in biology, William Ritchie now works as an artist constructing highly realistic paintings, drawings and sculpture that have received numerous awards and commendations. William's skill as an artist, coupled with his understanding of biology and the natural world, presents a unique perspective that is represented in the detail and character of his artwork. This unique blend allows him to more accurately portray subjects in ways that invite others to learn and better appreciate them.

A scientist who is now focused on the artistic merits of the wildlife and wild places you see; is this a good summary of your background?

Yes, that's fairly accurate. I have always been fascinated by the natural world and particularly animals. For me personally, art and science are both about learning. Bettering one's understanding of the natural world can be achieved through study, observation and reporting of findings. That's something that I find science has in common with art and certainly realistic wildlife and nature art.

With regard to reporting, it's really about sharing and communicating perspectives and understandings to others, again a common thread between science and art. In this regard, I find careful, detailed and accurate portrayals of the wildlife and wild places I see to be a very rewarding exercise from a personal perspective, and hopefully it serves to educate and engage others. Certainly, the work of others has and continues to educate and engage me.

Do you have favourite wildlife 'subjects'? Which do you find more challenging and why?

I am interested in all wildlife but birds seem to feature more in my art. As for favourites, I tend to gravitate towards the birds of prey. They are fewer in number and typically more solitary than prey species, each bird of prey species being an adept specialist with its own physiological and anatomical nuance. Every artwork presents its own challenge and the greater the challenge the more I get drawn to it. That is the beauty of wildlife art; it is the ultimate challenge to combine natural history understandings and insight with the technical aspects that make great art.

What process / routines do you undertake in choosing a subject and creating an artwork?

I tend to paint what I have seen or experienced and spend a lot of time walking outdoors for this reason. Photos are great reference material but ultimately it is the experience behind the image that makes it really stand out. This is why I haven't painted subjects that I haven't seen from places I haven't been.

I notice you paint, draw, do sculptures; how you decide on the medium?

I am at my happiest sketching from memory and particularly from life, it imparts a terrific since of freedom. The painting is the finished, refined showpiece. I gravitate to oils for larger and more imposing works, mostly because I love the medium and what it offers an artist creatively and technique-wise. The sculpture was really an offshoot from getting creative with scrap metal and a welder but I do intend to do some bronze work at some point.

Any advice for a beginner artist?

Drawing is the key. Draw whatever, whenever and however, never be afraid of mistakes, they make you better. Success is born from failure, coincidently in art and science, so embrace it. When you draw try to do it fast and free, you will get much better, much quicker and this will translate to painting and other forms of art.

I never had a camera growing up so relied on a pencil, binoculars and paper. It's a great challenge trying to capture the essence and character of something small and fast-moving like a wren and you learn so much about them in the process. When you hone in after a few pages of rubbish and loosen up, that's when the magic happens and you capture it with a couple of flicks in a matter of seconds. You know it when you see it and the feeling is great: that one diamond in 50 lumps of coal. I would recommend this to anyone starting out. You will learn so much more, things you can't learn copying a photo of something you have never seen and it will make you a better artist in the long run.

'Pyro' William Ritchie, 2017

Who is your favourite wildlife artist (mentor)?

For me, Ray Ching and Robert Bateman are top of the pile but there are so many incredible wildlife and nature artists. I was fortunate to have a couple of mentors growing up in the late Robert Ulmann and Richard Weatherly, who helped me along when I needed it.

Final thought

I think we are entering a time when the importance of wildlife and nature art has never been greater. I'm not referring to wildlife themed art but rather the realistic, informed and accurately depicted wildlife and nature art that showcases the wonders of the natural world and combines a deeper understanding of wildlife and nature with a very high degree of artistic merit and skill. It really is becoming important to show the world what is out there in the natural world because we are increasingly destroying it. It needs to be communicated that the natural world is irreplaceable and of the highest value to all of humanity. In this respect, highly skilled, realistic and informed wildlife and nature art has a really important role to play.

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Henricus Peters is Editor of NAEE's e-journal.

William Ritchie has been a finalist in the Holmes Art Prize for realistic bird life art and is a member of the prestigious Society of Animal Artists (SAA).

More information: williamritchie.com.au

BOOK REVIEWS

I Ate Sunshine for Breakfast

Michael Holland FLS & Philip Giordano

I Ate Sunshine for Breakfast is a book that explodes in front of you as soon as it comes out of the envelope or as it sits in the bookshop. The intriguing title and vibrant front cover ensures that the reader is compelled to open the book and read on.

The contents are clearly laid out at the beginning into four parts – 'All About Plants'; 'World of Plants'; 'From Breakfast until Bedtime' and 'The Power of Plants'. Each of these sections is comprised of a number of double page spreads relating to a relevant aspect of plants.

Information about plants is packed onto each page with full-page, captivating, stylistic, quirky artwork annotated and interspersed with text. This format might seem confusing but I did not find it so.

Highly coloured, the illustrations lose none of their accuracy of information and are laid out in a way that is clear, simple and visually pleasing as well as being instructive.

Equally I felt that the text alongside complements the artwork by using language that is straightforward, conversational and accessible whilst retaining an appropriate scientific and detailed level of content. In this way, some plant processes such as plant structure, photosynthesis and pollination, that can be difficult to grasp, are presented very clearly.

Once the basics of plant growth have been covered the book moves on to investigate more about plants – the range of type and form, the way that plants sustain us in our daily lives and the far-reaching properties that plants have that influence all aspects of our world.

Throughout the book the reader is presented with a number of simple artistic and scientific projects that could be undertaken at home or at school, all designed to demonstrate an interesting fact or the range of resources afforded by plants.

I can imagine that at primary school level, both KS1 and KS2 teachers would find this brilliant book a really useful resource for their programmes of study around plants, as well as providing additional information for many other curriculum areas such as geography, art, PSHE or environmental education.

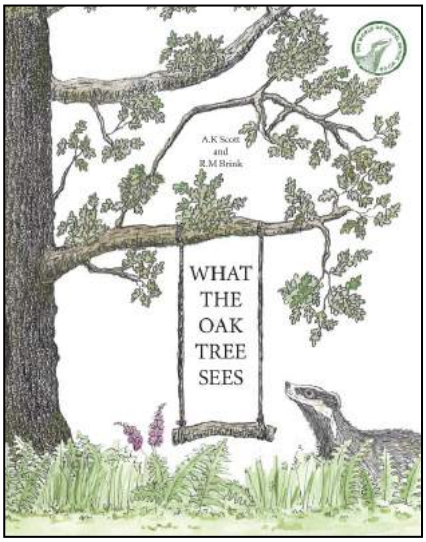
Personally I loved reading this book and I think it would inspire any reader, young or old, to re-consider their views of a plant world that all too often is taken for granted or ignored.

Holland, M., and Gordano, P. (2020). *I ate sunshine for breakfast: a celebration of plants around the world.* London: Flying Eye Books. ISBN: 978-191-911171-18-8.

Reviewed by Sue Shanks

What the Oak Tree Sees

A.K. Scott & R.M. Brink



This beautiful, whimsical and nostalgic picture book answers a question my children and I often ask of an oak tree in the village that we call home. This tree has been a place of refuge for us as a family since we arrived here six years ago, and I know that this is true for so many other humans and others who live near and in it. So when I saw this recently published picture book I jumped at the chance to review it.

The first thing that struck me is how the book feels. It has a silky smooth cover that invites stroking, and its muted colour pallet of greens, purple, white and black is equally enticing. The book is written in rhyme, and opens with a map reminiscent of the map in AA Milne's timeless stories. But this map is of Hiddel Brock Wood, which is a real place that you can discover about here: hiddelbrock.co.uk/about (as an aside, brock is a Celtic word for badger; and for me the word conjures up Beatrix Potter's badger, with his nasty smell and unpleasant habits!).

This book is an educational adventure that takes you through the diurnal experience of the oak tree in midsummer, teaching you the habits of British wildlife, managing to incorporate paw prints for each animal that is described for the keen young tracker to use as a key for identification.

The presence of a worn-out tree swing on every page heralds the arrival of people too, who are depicted as part of the woods – creatures, too – and the link to tracking is consolidated through the description of their activities under the oak tree.

The book closes with some activities for children to do, which adds to its appeal for parents and teachers alike.

Whilst there is no fictional tale here, the text is rich with cultural references, new accurate terminology, and points to initiate discussion; and the drawings are both beautiful and scientific in their observations of the habits and movements of the wildlife they depict. My personal favourite is the fox leaping to pounce, although I also loved looking for the red squirrel in different poses around the tree. I recommend this to any teacher or parent wanting to enrich their young children's knowledge of the wildlife of Britain and Ireland.

Scott, A.K. and Brink, R.M. (2021). What the oak tree sees. Northumberland: Hiddel Brock Wood. ISBN: 978-1-8383001-0-4. hiddelbrock.co.uk/books

Reviewed by Dr Elsa Lee

WEBWATCH

Nature arts and artists

Henricus Peters

Wildlife artists

Wildlife Art Society International is one of the leading Wildlife Art Societies in the UK and continues to grow in recognition internationally. The Society's basic aims are the promotion of the wildlife art genre in its own right, whilst providing a focus for the interests of all wildlife artists, painters, sculptors and photographers. twasi.com

The Society of Animal Artists is dedicated to promoting excellence in the portrayal of the creatures with which we share our planet. societyofanimalartists.com

Wildlife Art Society Australia aims to foster the study, practice and appreciation of wildlife art in artistic media, encourage the exchange of ideas and experiences, and promote the work of its members. WASA has a special interest in fostering an awareness, understanding and appreciation of Australia's unique flora and fauna. wildlifeartsociety.com

The American Society of Marine Artists is a non-profit organization whose purpose is to recognize, encourage and promote marine art and maritime history. americansocietyofmarineartists.com

Artists for Nature Foundation is a unique organisation that uses the creative output of artists from all over the world as a medium to draw attention to the need for nature to be appreciated as an essential element of sustainable development. artistsfornature.com

Botanical artists

The Association of British Botanical Artists focuses on scientifically-accurate botanical art often with an artistic element influenced by the medium. The Association fosters relationships with organisations who offer information on plant identification and plant ecology, promoting a wider knowledge and enjoyment of the plant kingdom. britishbotanicalartists.com

Botanical Art and Artists online includes links to information about botanical artists from around the world. botanicalartandartists.com

The American Society of Botanical Artists aims to provide a thriving, interactive community dedicated to perpetuating the tradition and contemporary practice of botanical art. asba-art.org

The Botanical Society of Australia is a non-profit organisation which aims to foster and promote the development of botanical art nationwide and to bring together people who have a love of plants. botanicalartsocietyaustralia.com

Nature journaling

Journaling with Nature: Artist and environmental educator Bethan Burton gives tips on 'nature journaling' – recording your interactions with nature on paper. People use nature journaling as a scientific tool, to understand the environment, connect with the seasons or keep track of what is happening in the garden. Others use it as a method of self-care, letting time spent in nature be a way to slow down, connect inwardly and find calm. Nature journaling is an 'outdoor classroom' therefore can include a range of curriculum areas. journalingwithnature.com

Wildlife photography

International Federation of Wildlife Photography represents 17 European associations and continues to increase, with more than 5,000 photographer members. It aims to promote ethical nature photography and conservation of habitats and species. ifwp-photo.org

The International League of Conservation Photographers is a US-based non-profit organization aiming to support environmental and cultural conservation through ethical photography and filmmaking. conservationphotographers.org

The Society of International Nature and Wildlife Photographers is for professionals and enthusiasts who enjoy photographing the natural world. Nature photography refers to a wide range of photography taken outdoors and devoted to displaying natural elements such as landscapes, wildlife, plants, and close-ups of natural scenes and textures. Wildlife photographers are devoted to capturing animals in action, such as in flight, their natural habitats, hunting, eating, fighting, or just simply in their natural environment. sinwp.com

North American Nature Photography Association members share a passion for nature photography and a belief in the power of storytelling to effect change. nanpa.org

Natural History Museum Wildlife Photographer of the Year: official website of the annual competition. nhm.ac.uk/wpy

The Photo Ark was founded by Joel Sartore, an award-winning photographer, conservationist, speaker and author. The project's mission is to document endangered species before they disappear. joelsartore.com/photo-ark

National Geographic Photography includes tips from the magazine's photographers on how to photograph animals in the wild. nationalgeographic.com/photography

Magazines featuring wildlife & nature photography

Discover Wildlife, from the team at BBC Nature Magazine, features amazing images and articles for all ages. discoverwildlife.com

Landscape Photography is the website home of a number of outdoors-focused image publications. landscapephotographymagazine.com

Museums

Nature in Art Gallery and Museum near Gloucester is the world's first museum and art gallery dedicated to fine, decorative and applied art inspired by nature. natureinart.org.uk

The National Museum of Wildlife Art (USA) has a mission to impart knowledge and inspire appreciation of humanity's relationship with wildlife and nature through art and education. The museum's website has a wide range of digital resources and hosts online exhibitions. wildlifeart.org/exhibits/exploring-wildlife-art

We are always looking to share useful and interesting websites. Please send your favourites to Henricus Peters via info@naee.org.uk.

FINAL THOUGHT

Knowing Earth through the arts

Elsa Lee

I hope you have enjoyed this fabulous collection of testaments to the importance of linking art and our natural world for the sake of children's learning. Reading these pieces has given me inspiration for a presentation I have been simmering where I want to highlight how art acts as a form of knowing the world, both in its current form, and how art informs our understanding of our journey through time. This has been surprisingly difficult to articulate. Perhaps this is because art so often (but not always) expresses our implicit and unspoken knowledge. Or perhaps it's because I turn to science when I want knowledge. How then, *is* art knowing? When defining art broadly (to include poetry, music, painting, theatre, moving image, dance and so on), I think there are some things we can only know through art and its performance. How else do we come to know music? Without story how impoverished would our sense of how others experience our natural world be? What would we know of the culture of our connection to nature without poetry, or landscape painting, or imaginative maps of actual places, like the one on the back cover from Elena Arévalo Melville, made up of the maps made by children? This question remains unresolved, but it has certainly proved to be a generative one, and this collection is a testament to the truth of that. Look out for my blog here naee.org.uk/blog if you are interested in thinking further about these questions.

Elsa Lee is a mother and academic researcher. She is also an NAEE Trustee, Vice Chair and the Publications Coordinator for this journal.

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THIS TREE IS BIGGER THAN EARTH
A FANTASTICAL MAP OF SPINNEY WILD WOODS