Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice

Sensing Nature's Pulse: On Relearning to Read the "Book of Nature"

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Volume 7

Issue 1

Spring 2024

Keywords:

art therapy,

ecosystemic,

nature,

environmental art therapy,

gardening

Citation Link

Abstract

In recent years, there has been a growing body of literature on nature-based art therapies. Within this relatively new specialism there are a number of emerging models of environmental art therapy practised by art therapists in the UK. Alongside this interest in the natural world, there is a growing awareness that, for therapeutic practices to remain relevant in today's world, they need to recognise that we exist as a part of - and not apart from - nature and that humans have a significant detrimental impact on the natural world as seen through the climate emergency, Bird (2023) and Deco (2021). The British Association of Art Therapist's (BAAT) focused on this concern in their 2023 annual conference on the theme "Art therapy and the climate crisis".

In writing this paper, I explore an area where I think art therapy would benefit from developing deeper reflections on the systemic nature of the ecological crises we face. The relationship between ourselves and the natural world necessarily involves ecological thinking such as "deep ecology", a concept developed by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1990), and the systemic thinking of Gregory Bateson (1972).

Here I explore how, in taking my art therapy practice outdoors, rather than being in the traditional art therapy studio, my therapeutic practice comes into immediate contact with the natural world, its dynamic rhythms, and its ecosystems. This makes possible practice which is open to engaging in a dialogue between humans (therapist and clients) and the many other life forms, plants, animals, insects, etc. as found in a garden, for example.

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A Winter Garden
Photo by Catherine Stevens

Introduction

This paper is a reflexive inquiry into my own practices, looking specifically at how running an environmental art therapy group in a garden where clients are invited to make art in response to the garden, allows creative encounters with the natural world. I suggest this can give new perspectives on our relationships with nature around us and nature within us. I look at my practice through this writing from a number of different perspectives which reflect my training as an artist, art therapist and gardener- horticulturalist.

I have called my paper "Sensing Nature's Pulse" because I want to move attention away from the western industrial world's exploitative attitude towards the natural world, away from viewing nature as a free, limitless resource to be plundered, dominated and controlled. As Rosi Braidotti says, "The posthuman predicament is framed by the opportunistic commodification of all that lives, which is the political economy of advanced capitalism" (Braidotti, 2019, p. 35).

This attitude towards the natural world, land and place comes with assumptions that nature is silent, soulless, controllable and unconscious. Such a world view is part of what lies behind our present day environmental and biodiversity crisis and this way of framing nature urgently needs to be challenged. Making connections between Indigenous knowledges, new materialist and posthuman theory

alongside social constructionism and systemic theory, Simon and Salter (2019) suggest that "Most theories about how the world functions have side-lined" the "rich knowledge" of indigenous cultures and that "dominant western, advanced capitalist views have positioned the natural world as a resource" (Simon and Salter, 2019, p. 3). I would agree with this perspective and feel concerned about this unhelpful linking of the natural world and the issue of resources. I can also relate with Roger Duncan (2021) when he says that "The ecological crisis has coincided with the painful awakening to the social and environmental destruction that has resulted from the legacy of a colonial world view of nature and culture. These events now demand a radical and deep adaption of our view of nature and culture" (Duncan, 2021, p. 32)

Art therapy, as a form of psychotherapy, can be part of that radical change. It already has the potential to value creativity over productivity. It uses visual and tactile media as a means of self-expression and communication. It is a profession that originated in the fields of both art and psychotherapy practice, using psychodynamic relational models to understand and address human distress. I propose that, as a professional group, we could further benefit from finding ways of engaging with broader systemic practices which would enable art therapy to develop a deeper and more complex understanding of the urgent issues of our times, those of environmental damage and the climate crisis which threatens all life (Bird 2023). In a sense by involving nature in environmental art therapy this necessarily moves the practice towards systemic practice. As ecosystemic therapist, Chiara Satin (2021) says "Nature is non-binary; it embraces opposites with courage and grace" (Santin, 2021, p. 28)

My method of exploring this terrain is qualitative and heuristic in that it involves the active process of discovery in the garden with the focus being on the narrative and poetic qualities that come from this kind of direct engagement with the living environment, through art making and the visual / verbal poetry that arise out of these creative encounters.

I believe this has a de-centring effect on us as human beings, enabling us to develop a deeper ecological perspective. I think that the therapeutic value of outdoor spaces for such work is centred around the "uncontrolled" nature of the garden setting, its aliveness and ability to surprise us through unique interactions and encounters, a process which I am calling "Sensing Nature's Pulse". I make use of the idea of "The Book of Nature" - a religious and philosophical concept originating in the Latin Middle Ages that views nature as "book" for knowledge and understanding – to explore how environmental art therapy can help us learn to read "The Book of Nature".

This is one way of contextualising the climate crisis through environmental art therapy which can lead to the development of greater ecological awareness. Some philosophical approaches, historically and currently, have focused on de-centring us as human beings in our relationships with nature. The seventeenth century philosopher (Spinoza, 2012) states that we cannot think of ourselves as outside of nature. Deep ecology, a concept developed by Arne Naess (1972) promotes the inherent worth of all living beings regardless of their instrumental utility to humans. I think this de-centring of human beings is essential in relearning of how to treat the natural world with care and respect and directly links to how de-centring human relationships in a therapy context can be transformative. Ecosystemic therapist, Chiara Santin says, "Practising ecotherapy in nature with a wild reflecting team of birds, wild animals, trees, whilst picking up some rubbish on the way out of the woods, might be a daring metaphor for giving voice to the most silenced and marginalised experiences in our communities, including our profession and wider socio-political contexts." (Santin, 2021, p. 29)

My practice in context

My relationship to the natural world is rooted in the experience of growing up in rural Scotland as a gender nonconforming gay Jewish woman. To set my understanding of nature in context I would say that my formative childhood years were spent with my parents frequently taking us walking in the mountains, canoeing on the lochs and my mother, particularly, liked to identify the wild flowers we found on our walks. These are beautiful wild terrains and from them I learnt first-hand to respect these landscapes knowing that bogs are dangerous if you fall in them, mist on the hills could result in you losing your way and falling off cliffs, and adders (snakes with a venomous bite) live in the bracken on the hillsides and were worth not getting bitten by. From an early age I have grown up with a powerful relationship to these landscapes and untamed places, and I am familiar with their animals and other non-human inhabitants. Therefore, my view of nature is not a particularly domesticated or romanticised one, because I know that these places also have a dangerous side - a side where humans can feel an appropriate sense of vulnerability, smallness, powerlessness and finiteness, and where if you misread the signs and are not well enough prepared, you could end up being seriously injured or losing your life. This awareness makes it clear that the world is not centred around humans, that this is a construct that has developed to serve a particular story and maintain particular power structures. Being in these kinds of landscapes, and in fact any outdoors landscape, gardens, forests, lakes and so forth has the power to challenge the kind of human arrogance that would place humans at the centre of the universe. Instead, nature can de-centre us, enabling us to see ourselves as part of the whole, alongside other living creatures, allowing in the other voices of creation with which we can have a living and respectful relationship.

I grew up in a family of scientists, biochemists, horticulturalists and vets, and so the methods and values of western sciences are something I absorbed from an early age at home as well as at school. However, this was balanced by my family's love of music and the visual arts. I was the only family member to follow the arts route by going to art college where I studied sculpture and made numerous sculptures of people, trees and animals created from wood, clay and stone. I also have an intense enjoyment of colour which led me to making stained glass windows, which I think of as painting with coloured light. My interest in people and wish to better understand complicated family relationships led me to train as an art psychotherapist and finally my mother's love of plants drew me to horticulture, so I also trained as a horticulturalist and worked as a community gardener.

My gender nonconformity has always been a part of me. Gender stereotypes and gendered expectations have always struck me as being rather amusing and odd which has occasionally left me feeling a bit alienated from my fellow human beings. The natural world is there to remind me that I do belong, like every other living creature.

Inquiring into my practice

As a practitioner-researcher I aim to be reflexive, critical and transparent about my assumptions and beliefs, and in order to do this I have intentionally drawn on my background in the visual arts, in horticulture and in art therapy, placing these together with my experiences of the natural world. I use these perspectives to reflect on my environmental art therapy practice.

I situate environmental art therapy within a network of loosely connected disciplines all of which show how we belong to nature, are a part of nature and are completely dependent upon nature, rather than nature belonging to us and us being independent and separate from nature.

Tudge (2006), a popular science writer, explains complex biochemical pathways such as photosynthesis in a way that the lay person with no scientific training can nonetheless appreciate the vital role that trees play in creating the oxygen we breathe, and how without them we could not exist. Darwin's ideas (1859) that he formed as a naturalist explorer, led him to develop his theory of evolution- that all living organisms have a common ancestor. Based on Darwin's ideas Shubin's (2009) book- "Your Inner Fish" shows how evolutionary biology, embryology, and palaeontology can be used to trace human bone structures back to fishes. Similarly, Mendel's ideas described by Henig (2000) demonstrate how by growing pea plants Mendel was able to discover the principles of genetics in plants and animals, laying the foundation for modern genetics as we know it today, and paving the way for plant breeding and genomic medicine. All these fields can be seen to de-centre human activity, as they reveal the many layers of our embeddedness in nature.

I found Bateson's "Steps to an ecology of mind" (1972) helpful in crossing this complex terrain. One of the things Bateson explores is how our thinking determines what we see, or don't see, and therefore the limits of our understanding. I find Bateson's categorisation of different kinds of knowledge useful, and what he describes as the dominant thinking and preoccupation of scientific thought since the time of Newton, that of the empirical inductive habit which is focused solely on measurable entities such as time, distance, matter and energy. This form of thinking is linear and constructs its world view in terms of cause and effect. This appears to have worked well for areas of interest that involve quantifiable, measurable entities such as in the "hard" sciences, (physics, mathematics, chemistry and horticulture) and their discoveries and applications to everyday life. However, this scientific worldview appears to be *silent* when it comes to understanding what it means to be human, the meaning we construct about our lives, our place within the natural world, our suffering, our joys and our experiences as transient, conscious, sensory, beings. This, in my view, is a very significant omission and my hope is that environmental art therapy may provide one way of rekindling a dialogue between humans and our living environment.

Environmental art therapy is a practice which facilitates direct encounters with the natural world (A'Court, 2016; Berger, 2016; Deco, 2021; Heginworth and Nash, 2020; Jordan and Hinds, 2016; Levine and Kopytin, 2022). By describing some of the unique encounters between people, plants and other living creatures in my practice I aim to illustrate its scope. The practices I am focusing on centre on an environmental art therapy group where the meaning of these encounters and their therapeutic value evolved directly out of each spontaneous, unique, experience. Chiara Santin talks about nature as a co-therapist in her practice with individuals, families and groups, working outdoors. She says, "Practising in nature has allowed me to trust nature as a co-therapist and often as a primary therapist in a therapeutic process which is based on relating to one another as human beings and to the other-than-human world." (Santin, 2019, p. 28) and I connect with this idea in my work.

At the heart of these kinds of therapeutic transformative engagements is a way of being open to looking for what we do not yet know, or "Sensing Nature's Pulse". This is a form of practice where the methodology is rooted in the practice context, something I have previously written about (Heath and Stevens, 2018)

In conjunction with this "re-turning to nature" is the ongoing effects on mental health of the covid pandemic and our increasing use of technology to mediate our contact with the natural world. I would suggest that this is an additional component impacting an increased disassociation and estrangement from nature. To counter this disassociation, I aim to show how art making in an environmental art therapy group is one way of experiencing the healing effects of the natural world which enables us to respond to nature's pulse.

Methods - Environmental art therapy

My method of exploring environmental art therapy is the same as my method of doing art therapy, it is qualitative and heuristic. It involves the active process of discovery in the garden with the direct engagement with the living environment, through art making; and it involves the active process of inquiring into these practices with the natural world as my co-researcher, as Santin (2021) has spoken about.

It has not been easy to find a ready-made methodology that is a good fit for this field of study and some of the difficulty arises from the way that environmental art therapy crosses a number of different terrains, that of the visual arts, therapies and storytelling, ecology and systemic practices, horticulture and the natural sciences, and draws meaning from all of these. I think this is maybe a work in progress for me that might develop as I continue to write and speak about my practices.

In my experience, it is only through careful observations and attention to details that we can sense the patterns in nature and in ourselves. The metaphor I'd like to use is of the uniqueness of every garden with its own plants, artists, gardeners, visitors (humans, animals, and insects), microclimate, seasons, weather conditions, and how all of these are site specific and particular to a time and geographical location. In a sense, these are the many layers of the context, the landscapes in which we are embedded, giving rise to the meaning and stories we draw from them. None of these interactions can be duplicated and I would argue that it is precisely the unrepeatable quality of these interactions and observations that make them *therapeutic and healing.* The deeper meaning and beauty of our embeddedness in nature rests on the fact that these encounters cannot take place in a "controlled environment" and therefore they have an infinite capacity to surprise us and reveal deeper patterns of meaning and connectedness of which we were previously unaware.

A visual illustration of this can be seen in the book "Nature's Chaos" (James and Porter, 1990) which is a collection of photographs showing nature's way of creating patterns out of chaos, illustrating the idea that the essence of earth's beauty lies in disorder and the unexpected. I like to extend the visual ideas expressed in "Nature's Chaos" to how we can see ourselves as a part of this process, and the beauty that comes from our human un-orderliness and unexpected creativity.

Indeed, when looking at art therapy it is clear that there is no such thing as a "controlled environment" because we cannot control nature / the environment. We interact with nature; we are a part of nature but we are not in control of it and we did not create it.

The living natural world is always giving us feedback, continually responding, and although there are times when we may be unaware of this, unwilling or unable to listen to these other- than- human perspectives on life, they are ever present and clearly illustrate that nature is not silent but speaks to

us in many ways. This is not a new idea as the seventeenth century religious and philosophical concept of "The Book of Nature" shows and other more recent writers such as Jamie Bird (2023), Ian Siddons Heginworth and Gary Nash (2020), Martin Jordan and Joe Hinds (2016), Stephen Levine and Alaxander Kopytin (2022), Mary-Jayne Rust (2020), Meredith Sabini (2016), Sue Stuart-Smith (2020) and Nick Totton (2011, 2021) as well as Indigenous theorists and practitioners like Robin Wall Kimmerer (2020) and Cathy Richardson (2021) show us. Contemporary therapists are also working creatively with these ancient wisdoms as a previous special issue of this journal featuring systemic therapists like Chiara Santin (2021); Hugh Palmer (2021) Leah Salter, Lisen Kebbe and Gail Simon (2021) highlights.

Re-learning to read the "Book of Nature": Observations of an artist / gardener

Artists working outdoors are aware of and responsive to the unique visual patterning of nature. Patterns such as the changing of the light and colours as the shadows of clouds pass over the hillsides, colour changes in tree leaves as autumn approaches, the movement and sound of grass and trees in the wind, the ripple patterns and the splash as a duck lands on a pond, the way that a field of sunflowers will daily track the slow movement of the sun from sunrise to sunset, from east to west in their slow turning of heads.

These movements and changes over time are something that intuitive, sensitive gardeners also know about and pay attention to, like the gradual swelling of tree buds which start to develop after mid-summer and reach their fullest just before bud burst in spring.

These observational skills are required if you wish to successfully graft a new apple tree which needs to be done in the spring when the tree is coming out of dormancy just before buds burst, at the point when the tree's sap starts to rise. Some changes are rapid, like when on a hot summer day you happen to be standing beside a broom bush when its ripening dark brown seed pods suddenly burst open and catapult seeds out onto the ground. Other changes are so slow you barely notice them, like the annual growth of a young fruit tree. However, what is apparent is that if you are not looking and paying attention to these things on a regular basis, if you do not frequently have the opportunity to be immersed in nature, you will miss these changes and their significance in the wider interconnectedness of the garden's ecosystems. Missing these links due to the lack of opportunities to carefully observe and become immersed in nature's patterns is one of the things that lies at the root of the estrangement many people experience from the natural world. Both gardeners and artist's pay careful attention to these small significant details and without them we cannot read nature, nor can we understand how these webs of connection include us. Likewise, an environmental art therapist needs to cultivate a similar careful attentiveness to the details of their client's communications, in their poetic visual imagery, and how this is read and responded to by other group members.

Natures dynamic patterns of continual change can be seen in many ways through the recurring presence of various cycles such as a plants annual growth cycle over the seasons of spring, summer, autumn and winter. There are other vital cycles such as the water cycle, the nitrogen cycle, and cycles of growth and decomposition enabling the recycling of organic materials that provide the resources for new growth, in other words "garden composting".

As therapists the psychological equivalent of "garden composting" can be found as we frequently work with people struggling with loss and change, and one of the advantages of working therapeutically in a garden is that gardens actively illustrate that loss and change are essential components of life,

indeed that they are formative processes in all living experiences and we learn and grow through them continually, a continual recycling if you like, working through old experiences to make way for new ones. These experiences can lead to maturation and wisdom.

Observations of a gardener

When I started my job as a community gardener that particular year turned out to be the last year of my mother's life. She was a good gardener, who had over the past thirty years created a garden from scratch on a moorland site in Scotland. Therefore, it felt fitting that I should start work as a gardener, (in a garden where I later introduced environmental art therapy groups) as this gave me a garden into which I could transplant some of my mother's plants as well as a place to grieve and prepare for her departure, amongst the other life cycles of becoming and departing that are embodied in gardens and the broader natural world. In gardens you quickly become aware of the different lengths of life cycles, some far shorter than your own like that of the iridescent winged dragonfly, some far longer like that of the oak tree. This places human life and the human lifecycle in a context of other lifecycles. This contextualising has a grounding effect, giving a sense of your own placing within creation and the perimeters of the time allotted to you. This is not something of our own making, but rather something through which we are made. There is no arguing with it, it is a given, which roots and grounds us.

Community gardens can be hubs of local knowledge about plants and organic food growing practices which do not use herbicides, pesticides or inorganic fertilisers. These gardens can be places where traditional local knowledge and skills such as bee keeping, seed saving and local seed exchanges for food growers (Cherfas and Fanton, 1996), fruit tree grafting and orchard maintenance are passed on (for example: The Orchard Project; Southwick, 1979; Ward, 2014). The skills needed for plant identification and foraging may be learnt alongside imparting broader knowledge about wild plants (Maybe, 2012, 1996) including those with medicinal properties (Culpeper, 1652; Elpel, 2000).

At the community garden where I work, one way in which organic food growing practices can be passed on is through the community garden's annual winter fruit tree pruning workshops where I usually start by teaching people how to read their trees. Winter is a good time to look at deciduous trees because it is far easier to see what is going on when looking at a dormant branch with no leaves to distract you. If you stand in front of a four year old apple tree, and gently take hold of a dormant leafless branch you will notice various things. At its tip a branch, like every other undamaged branch, will end with a rather large bud. This is called the apical bud and it is the point from which the tree's new growth will begin every spring. Looking down the branch from the apical bud you will see a series of leaf scars. These are crescent shaped scars which are all that remains of where last year's leaf was attached to the branch. Just above each leaf scar, you will find a very small flattened bud. As you progress down the branch sooner or later you will come to a point that looks like a leaf scar except that it encircles the whole branch. This is a growth ring and it marks where last year's apical bud was, and also indicates the transition between one year old and two year old wood. Careful observation also enables you to distinguish between leaf buds and flower buds, which gives a clear indication of the amount of fruit the tree will produce in the coming year. There are many other things that can be learnt about trees using "indigenous knowledge" as Gooley (2024) describes in his book, "How to read a tree". Other organisations that aim to support and promote local environmental learning, like the identification of trees and insects include the AIDGAP publications produced by the Field Studies Council.

The horticulturally-informed environmental art therapist can use their horticultural understanding such as this, as a resource for reflecting on significant stages of growth and life cycles where we can see ourselves mirrored by other living organisms. These observations can be used in a therapy group as metaphors for psychological change and transformation, injury and recovery, as well as supporting the development within the group of a deeper ecological understanding and appreciation of life.

An inner-city environmental art therapy group, its setting and context

Environmental art therapy groups directly involve nature in a number of ways; 1) nature /a garden, being the setting for the group and the context in which we are embedded, a dynamic, living, breathing, patterned environment 2) nature being the provider of natural art materials, clay, charcoal, wood etc., 3) the natural world providing us with aesthetic multi-sensory experiences that engage our creative imagination and 4) nature itself as guide.

The environmental art therapy group takes place in the same community garden that I have described above. This garden is situated in a large inner city park whose boundaries neighbour on some of the city's poorest boroughs with ethnically diverse populations. The group runs for two hours on a weekly basis throughout the year and is funded by a private donor whose donation pays for the hire of the community garden, the art therapist, and some basic art materials which enables members to attend for free. The garden is closed to the public on the days of the group. Significantly the garden's location in the middle of a park results in there being a very poor WiFi signal, which means people cannot rely on their mobile devices, and this too acts as a way of supporting group members in focusing on the multi-sensory experience of being in a garden without any technological distractions.

The group is open to local residents and invites self-referral from those who are experiencing emotional stress or distress in their lives, and who wish to find a creative therapeutic space to attend to these experiences. Members are asked to make a commitment to attend the group regularly, and by being a free local resource this therapeutic group aims to address some of the economic and health inequalities found in this inner-city area.

The structure of the group

I structured the group in such a way that its duration is two hours with the majority of the time being spent in art making and the last twenty minutes of each group is set aside for members to come together and reflect on what they have created. I am the timekeeper. Art making can be a time-consuming activity and it is not uncommon for members to comment on the time constraints of this group. However, the semi permanence of the art works means that they can be viewed over a number of weeks allowing different meanings to emerge over time.

The garden is about an acre in size and is situated in the middle of the park. It is completely enclosed by walls, fences and hedges and has many nooks and crannies. Each week members choose how close or far apart from each other they wish to work. Sometimes I find many members congregated in a small area while at other times they were spread all around the garden out of sight of each other.

When participants arrive at the garden, I invite them to explore the garden and find their subject matter in the garden, using the garden as a source of inspiration and also potential art materials. This

means that there are many drawings/paintings of the wildflower meadow, the vegetable beds, the orchard, the pond, the compost heaps, and bee hives. In a sense the artworks made by this group are portraits of the garden throughout the year, as well as being self-portraits of the artists' inner lives as inspired by the garden. I will illustrate this through a few anonymised vignettes in which identifying features of the artists/clients have been disguised.

Art making

Working outside, as this group does, involves the unavoidable need to work with the changing seasons and cycles of nature. Group members often comment on the way in which this immersive multi-sensory experience involves noticing how the garden looks different from week to week, smells different, and sounds different. Thus, alongside the seasonal fluctuations in temperature, day lengths and so forth, the garden is dynamically changing in other ways too.

Making art outside has its challenges, including working around heavy down pours. On a very wet day one group member drew the pond as an expressive miniature line drawing, about 8cm square. In the group discussion she spoke about having been to see an exhibition of Leonardo's drawings and being struck by how he had drawn a powerful apocalypse scene - a deluge, on a very small piece of paper. Group members laughed at the vastness of the themes that could be artistically rendered in a very small space and appreciated the sense of scale and perspective in this woman's drawing. I commented that her drawing made me think of William Blake's poem "To see the world in a grain of sand" and how infinity can be experienced on the microscopic as well as the macroscopic scale. Another member noted that Leonardo was famous as a pioneer in the study of analysing fluid dynamics, which are represented in drawings like his "deluge" that shows the effect of flow, force and turbulence. Leonardo, the member noted, was interested in visually describing these fleeting, rapidly changing natural phenomena, not unlike a number of cloud drawings he had made previously in the group. Another group member who often spoke about feeling very alone in the world and linked this to their experience of being transgender, noted that they only felt alive when swimming upstream, pushing against the direction of flow.

This group vignette shows how themes of life and death, microcosm and macrocosm, and the changing directions of flow in systems can arise as themes in an environmental art therapy group inspired by being outdoors in a garden in all weathers.

By meeting on a weekly basis over several years group members began to notice how nature's living processes have timings. They noted how annual cycles are reflected in repeating patterns of seasonal change; things like which month and for how many weeks various trees flowered. That trees often flower first and then develop their leaves - so pollinating insects have an easier time finding and pollinating their flowers before the leaves hide them. Other timings that were noted were when the frog spawn appears in the pond and when the tadpoles emerge. When the birds nest and fledglings appear. When in summer the stag beetles and dragonflies fly around the garden. When the fruit ripens on the raspberry canes, the fruit bushes and in the orchard. When the leaves change colour and fall off the trees. When the bullfinches come to eat the teasel seeds in winter in the meadow, and the water on the pond freezes, and frosty leaflike patterns appear on the greenhouse glass.

Discussion - On not being able to read the "Book of Nature"

Looking at the observations and experiences members of the group had through making art in a garden we can ask, "How have we become estranged from nature and estranged from ourselves and our place in the natural world" and "What effect does this estrangement have on us and the broader ecosystems that support our lives?"

There appears to be a number of elements to this. One common aspect for group members was that of growing up in inner city areas with little access to green outdoors spaces, or for some adults later estranged from the land, resulted in a loss of the opportunities and the ability to read plants, clouds, and the passing of the seasons which can only be done through having regular access to a particular living environment. These are skills which need time to develop and a consistent location in order for us to be able to decipher the complexities of such interactions and their meanings. If these skills are not regularly used they can be lost and once lost this can erase our sense of connectedness to the natural world and the ability to read the 'Book of Nature' through tracking the cycles, patterns, rhythms and the poetry in the natural world around us and within us. On the other hand, if we never have the opportunity to develop these skills and sensitivities or lose them later through lack of access to green spaces, this can lead to a deep sense of estrangement from living processes which may result in anxiety and depression.

There is also a loss of ecological understanding, which makes us more likely to enact environmental damage without knowing what we are doing, because we do not understand the consequences of our actions. One example of this could be the loss of insect habitats resulting from cutting the long grass in parks where many insects feed, take shelter and breed. Another example of habitat loss is that of paving over front gardens. However, in the countryside the main contributor to the massive decline of pollinating insects can once again be attributed to the agrochemical industry and the production and use of herbicides which, as well as killing the so-called weeds (otherwise known as wild flowers, around farmers' fields, also harms pollinating insects. With the resultant loss of pollinating insects comes a general threat to our food security because we need insects to pollinate flowers, to produce fruits and seeds in order to sustain the edible plants that are our food source. This is crucial because plants are the foundation of the food chain upon which all living creatures depend.

I would argue that when technology is used in a disproportionate way, they can erode the time and the multi-sensory ways, through touch, sound, taste, scent and sight in which we choose to interact with the natural world and technology can also put pressure on us to respond quickly under time pressure. Nature's cycles will not be hurried in this way, which is why gardeners usually think in terms of yearly cycles or longer. Most of the group time is involved in art making, and art making can be time consuming, which helps us to slow down and get back into a non-technological time frame, an organic rhythm with its ebbs and flows. Art making, like walking, can absorb us and enable us to lose track of time, time to clear our heads and sometimes almost accidentally work through things that had been playing on our minds. Making art can allow our thoughts to wander and imaginatively explore the cosmos and its vastness, with the stars above and the lands and seas below that speak to us through *all* of our senses.

There are many observations that can occur while making art outdoors that have an aesthetic, poetic, quality while at the same enabling us to make connections to the systemic nature of ecosystems. These are all things that we can sense through multiple observations in a garden and the encounters

between ourselves and the other- than- human visitors to a garden. When we make art in a garden, through careful observation of our living environment I think that we are relearning how to read "The Book of Nature".

Conclusion

Through this paper I have been able to articulate my developing thinking and practices linked to the relatively new practice of environmental art therapy which emphasises the centrality of the natural world and the importance of our relationships with nature.

The paper is set in the context of the climate crisis and discusses the need for art therapy to develop a broader systemic approach to its practice in order to remain relevant to today's world and the challenges of biodiversity loss and climate change that affect us all.

Through exploring the multi-sensory artistic engagement of an environmental art therapy group, I have looked at the importance of creating spaces where we can reflect upon our relationships with the other- than- human world in ways that can be artistic, aesthetic, philosophical, scientific and spiritual. Through such regular engagement with nature's poetry, we can develop a closer relationship between nature inside and outside us, a relationship that is healing to both ourselves and our environment as we relearn to read the "Book of Nature".

Growth rings on a weathered tree stump
Photo by Catherine Stevens

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Citation

Stevens, Catherine (2024). Sensing Nature's Pulse: On Relearning to Read the "Book of Nature". *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice,* 7(1), 70-83. https://doi.org/10.28963/7.1.6