

Miranda Matthews Ecologies in Practice Presentation

14 December 2021

Slide 1) Hello all, and thank you for joining us for the Centre for Arts and Learning Ecologies in Practice Symposium. It will be a day of problem-posing, criticality and investigation into how the arts can contribute to a world of pluralities in the environment, social relations, human subjectivity and cultural diversity (Guattari 2008, 19).

I am Miranda Matthews, Head of CAL, at Goldsmiths. Could I please remind all panellists to hide camera and mute mic until you are presenting. Speakers have planned time at the end of all presentations for questions, which can be put in the chat as we go along. All presentations will be recorded, except for the screening of the Fen Earth Film *Mar & Cielo*.

This year CAL audiences are hearing from practitioners, researchers, curators and arts activists who work with ecological motivations. So far we have heard from speakers who encourage imaginative creative practice, and who challenge superficial institutional responses to the need to make changes that will support sustainable learning environments. Today our speakers will be discussing ecological practice in numerous art forms, and with interdisciplinary, collaborative connections.

As we are gathering our participatory audience today, I will share some reflections that I have observed, in developing the CAL programme of events for 2021-22. My intentions are to contribute the Centre's resources and networking potential, to what can be seen as global activism for intervention in the ways that the world, peoples, animals and the atmosphere we share, have been treated.

Slide 2 (My practice slide) In responsive teaching and learning processes, there can be constantly evolving ecologies, as we share our understandings of practice, and the manifold issues it contends with. Ecologies in Practice are encouraging students of all ages, abilities, capacities, ethnicities, genders, sexualities and faiths, to explore creative learning pathways, and to look out for one another in doing so.

Arts educators who relate to critical pedagogies, bring their research and experiences of thinking and making into dialogical, lateral communications with students. This year I have been all the more conscious of how we can input to confident, vocal cultural narratives, that draw diverse experiences into a sense of belonging via the arts. With intentions of building lateral learning spaces, practice research can include discussion with undergraduate and postgraduate students about their cultural narratives of belonging. These discursive spaces explore ways that arts practice can access the affective forces, and pre-existing knowledges, that enable students to build vocal self-confidence.

Of course, arts practice is not just visual, the arts connect with all of the senses, generating restorative recollection, and future possibilities. We may explore feelings of belonging found in a scent, a texture, a colour, a sound. The location of affective fragments, and autoethnographic elements, can enable a blending of known and unknown; connecting with feelings of strangeness in newness and reorientation (Matthews 2021), as learning processes as they begin to map new experiences as territories of adventure (Atkinson 2018).

Slide 3 (My practice and Stik) Arts practice both aerates and embodies, the complexity of existence. In the breathing spaces of making and reflecting, connecting with the world views of self and others, the arts materialise problems left unsolved by the sciences. The arts, as mobile and shape-shifting public pedagogies can map states of dispossession and visibility, give substance to what might otherwise be the empty properties of capitalism. In this way ecologies of arts practice can bring emotive humanising character to the labyrinthine entanglements of concrete jungles. For instance, when I was making a tree weaving in the park, I was approached by street artist Stik, who asked me what I was up to. In this conversation, a weaving of different approaches and social influences in arts practice happened. It is clear that the arts can form mobile, urban, public pedagogies form ecologies and bridge gaps. Some park workers asked me 'is it art?' So we had that discussion also.

Slide 4 (Collective action in dispersed communities) The arts also help energise and nurture rural, dispersed communities, connecting them with routes for creative exchange and communication. In the UK we have recently seen this happening through collective action in what had become run down seaside towns, past resorts and territories isolated in lockdown in the pandemic. Margate, Hastings, Watchet, Whitstable, and Weston Supermare – the once beleaguered site of Banksy's 'Dismal land' now have new hubs of activity.

Slide 5 (Cultivating a dissensus) Yet this new activity then calls into being the question of gentrification, of 'art washing', and 'green washing'. Arts practice tries to 'cultivate a dissensus', as happens in Guattari's three ecologies of environment, social relations and human subjectivity (Guattari 2014, 19). Ecologies in practice aim to make sustainable inclusive developments as they 'land perceptually' – to 'field-with' local peoples whose livelihoods have become interspersed with arts projects. Some activist arts projects integrally reflect on these issues, as have Climate Museum UK, Empathy HQ in Bow. and the Museum of Neoliberalism in Lewisham – the latter was recently brought to my attention by Kevin Campbell-Davidson in CAL. My question at this point would be, how can we also avoid ecology-washing in learning processes? You can put questions in the chat if you like.

Slide 6 (Symposium cover slide) The Centre for Arts and Learning is developing international research interactions, with the intention of building sustainable collaborative practices. Today's symposium is a gathering of speakers for aware and

supportive momentum. CAL members and Associates are currently considering how the arts let in tractable methods and processes, that can heal the brittle edges of eco-anxiety, and enable silenced intersectional oppressions to surface and demand cultural reparation.

The organic forgiveness of trial and error in ecological practice can I think assist ways of articulating frustrations with the stiffness of conventions in institutional learning spaces, for greater flexibility, anticipation of capacity and inclusion. In trying to make changes arts educators will make mistakes, and will need to be able to take on board constructive criticism. Ecologies in practice will not then enable us to escape into a floating dream of harmonious perfection.

With a view of historical and contemporary practice, art can be seen as encompassing practicalities and pragmatism, in processes of finding, re-purposing, re-imagining, assembling, gathering and representing self, culture and environment. You may bring to mind artwork created from household materials, from recycled found materials, from historicised ephemera, and from cultural traditions adapted, intercepted and challenged over generations.

Slide 7 (GCCA) Art can make space for sensory voices at geopolitical limits and borders. On recent gallery visits, I have observed how contemporary artists are making space across boundaries, for acclimatising experiences in new strange environments, and for understanding how to encourage biodiversity and articulate political differences. For instance, at Goldsmiths CCA, the gallery that is next to the Art in Education Building at Goldsmiths, Eugenio Dittborn's airmail paintings subtly reference the appearance, and sinister disappearance, of political prisoners in Chile. This work reminds us that sometimes the geopolitical findings of our reconnections with the Earth uncover tragic histories, and we will hear more of this in Erin Manning's presentation today.

Slide 8 (Phyllida Barlow) Found, assembled articulations in art can be seen in Phyllida Barlow's Artist Room, at Tate Modern. Barlow's sculpture made from layered and stacked materials can be seen to echo the genealogies of social history, and the geological layers of Earth's land masses. The relation between Barlow's sculpture and processes of mind and body resonates with human subjectivity, that condition of being that sometimes 'gets a bad press' as Guattari said (2008, 25), as we reflect on what it means to be human and our consciousness of self and others.

Slide 9 (Taus Makhacheva) Arts practice can be seen as as a daring action, that in its focused application 'generates the impossible' (Manning and Massumi 2014, 127) to become 'suddenly possible' (Atkinson 2018, 4). For example, artist Taus Makhacheva, collaborated with fifth generation tight-rope walker Rasul Abakarov, to take some reproductions of artwork from Dagestan in Russia to the top of perilous mountains, a Republic of Russia. Makhacheva creates a metaphor in practice for the vulnerability of culture, and also the incredible physical capacities made possible through ecologies in practice, as Abakarov transports the artworks from one mountain peak to the other. In a

sense Makhacheva is visibly 'generating the impossible' as Manning and Massumi say, through 'an exercise in the potential becoming-political of art beyond its limit' (2014, 127). It could also be said that Makhacheva prefigures the 'suddenly possible' in raising the question of how marginalised arts practices can be curated and made sustainable.

Slide 8) At Whitechapel Gallery, Theaster Gates 'Clay Sermon' is a really moving exhibition of ceramics and film combining the cultural ecologies of spiritual music and the earthiness of clay, the closeness to the land. Gates is renowned for salvaging materials from derelict buildings in Chicago, selling the work he creates and then returning some of the profits to regenerate areas, including local people in the workforces for these new creations. Gates takes philanthropic ecologies in practice outside of 'white saviourism' (Jefferess 2021, 426) towards an inclusive sense of 'a new deal' between 'capital and human activity' (Guattari 2008, 33) as those involved in his urban regeneration projects are scaffolded and supported, as they learn how to make sustainable livelihoods.

Slide 9) A current exhibition that recognises the achievements of black artists and artists of colour is 'Life Between Islands: British Caribbean art 1950s to now. This exhibition assembles complexity and criticality, in artworks created by artists making work in multiple cultures. The complex singularities made in what Patricia Hill Collins calls 'creative social action' (Collins 2019, 172) evidence also what Manning and Massumi term 'Collective individuation in the milieu of expression' (Manning and Massumi 2014, 30). Paul Dash, who worked in Art Education at Goldsmiths until 2011 has works on show – two of which were made when he was a teenager in the early 1960s, these early works show the great interdisciplinary arts connections that were happening at the time, to break down barriers of endemic racism in Britain's schools and universities. There are so many wonderful Ecologies in Practice in Life Between Islands. The incredible geopolitical and historical connections made by the Otolith group, who image 'infinity minus infinity' including climate change saying, 'the anti-black impetus of extractivism' is 'looking towards the end of the world and not at the histories of what has already happened.' (Otolith Group 2019).

When planning learning activities for students that can include their own cultural narratives, their story cultures, I think about how they might want to transform their fluid assemblages of identity, in relation to environment and community. In the texts of our keynote speakers today Dennis Atkinson and Erin Manning, and in works by Felix Guattari, bel hooks, Paul Dash, are resonating reflective passages that relate to arts practice, and relate to what happens in arts practice - to the sensory embodiments of found materials, a patchwork of vignettes, of memories collected. These texts in connection with art making, can help arts educators problem-pose questions such as: 'How do we learn from other cultures without appropriating?

Argumentation and activism in the arts therefore work together to enable the creation of cultural narratives and self-representation. The endeavour for more real and meaningful connections, acknowledging struggles of existence in the making of work, and in the

pursuit of sustainable practices that are still enjoyable, inviting, delightful and joyful, continue to open new vistas in learning, and to enable caring relationships in practice. So let us say that I hope arts practice can continue to help us make friends with, comfort and repair the Earth again, instead of planning some distant evacuation for the few, wealthy extractivist capitalists who in their blue sky space tourist thinking seek to travel to another world, where they will maybe find a little water.

Slide 10) Here is our schedule for today, if you would like to screenshot this slide. It's a day with space for reflection and contribution. Our next presentation is from Art Research Learning Group (ARLG). The group was started to extend collaborative practice research developed on the MA Art and Learning course at Goldsmiths. ARLC offers a non-hierarchical, supportive online space where ideas, research methodologies and critical pedagogies are tested and shared. I will now handover to Art Research Learning Group

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