

HOW WE SHARE

CONVERSATIONS WITH ARTISTS, THINKERS AND DOERS
THAT REFLECT ON SOCIALLY ENGAGED APPROACHES TO
MAKING WORK IN THE CLIMATE ERA

Interviews conducted and edited by Maeve Stone



Hard times are coming, when we'll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. We'll need writers who can remember freedom — poets, visionaries — realists of a larger reality.

- URSULA K. LE GUIN



INTRODUCTION

FINDING CONNECTION AND TUNING IN



I have dedicated the best part of ten years to asking what my role as an artist in the climate crisis is. What is the best application of my skills as a storyteller and creative thinker? The question reappears at points when I feel lost, or frustrated, scared or disconnected. I wonder again what it is I might be doing more of - or better - that could help. I suspect this will be the way it goes for several more decades as we all learn how to be in a strange and shifting reality. And as with all hard things this time has been held in balance by the company I have found.

The least surprising thing I can share is that people who are predisposed to thinking about the nature and biodiversity crises, as well as the climate emergency, tend to be wonderful, warm and caring. I have learned so much from my friends and mentors about so many aspects of nature, society, colonialism, design, faith, grief, wonder, imagination. I struggle sometimes with the feeling that everyone doesn't get the chance to spend their time so well. So, I would like, wherever I am able, to share. I'm grateful to be able to do that here with support from the Arts Council and a Participatory Arts Bursary.

We can see things shifting now, knots coming loose. There's a terrible and wonderful potential in seeing the way things have been start to flicker, falter and fail. We ask ourselves what skills we need to discover something new, or to find a future together. We start looking for the map to build community and, unexpectedly, we uncover ourselves.

CONVERSATIONS



1.

**EILEEN
HUTTON**
ARTIST



2.

**LOUIS
HAUGH**
ARTIST



3.

**CATHERINE
CLEARY**
POCKET FOREST



4.

**ANNE CLEARY/DENIS
CONNOLLY**
SCHOOL OF LOOKING



5.

**CATHY
FITZGERALD**
HAUMEA ECOVERSITY

CONVERSATIONS



6.

**ANNE
KEARNS**

CO-CENTRE FOR CLIMATE
BIODIVERSITY + WATER



7.

**VANYA
LAMBRECHT-WARD**
ARTIST



8.

**SINEAD
CURRAN**

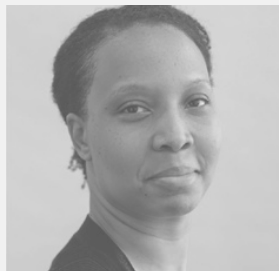
ARTIST



9.

**LISA
FINGLETON**

ARTIST



10.

**ABI
IGHODARO**
ARTIST



You do not have to picture the destination to reach it or at least draw closer to it, you just need to choose a direction and keep on walking - Rebecca Solnit



EILEEN HUTTON

GATHERING THE SMALL THINGS

Maeve Stone: Was there a person or a place that was instrumental in activating your young imagination.

Eileen Hutton: I grew up on the river in Florida. It's actually an oxbow lake, you know, so the river runs, and then it kind of bows out, and then connects back and there's a little island in the middle of the river. I grew up on the outside of that. There was 7 families, and there was one boat. They would take us out water skiing and the water was brackish where the saltwater and freshwater mixed. It looked like really strong, dark tea. And I can still smell it... it has that really kind of mineral quality. When I start to think of home I start to smell that smell, that kind of briny smell. I think that was my first experience of being immersed in the environment in such a tactile way. I think of swimming... just feeling that whole immersion, and that kind of freedom of movement.

Maeve Stone: Is there an experience that you have recognised as being an important point where nature began to emerge in the work that you make as an artist?

Eileen Hutton: I guess I feel like it's always been there. I have these ways of working in practice that I tend to go back to. Magpie or corvid tendencies, right? I gather the pretty, the shiny, the interesting, the kind of the unusual. In college in Florida we had this big group assignment where we had to lead a drawing workshop. I started to gather these leaves, all these kind of interesting-looking leaves and small little things. The work was going to be 'draw this thing 20 times its actual size' as a way to encourage deep observation and paying attention to things that are overlooked. But I realised I had been collecting for months and months and months, and I had this treasure trove of things. A cabinet of curiosities. That instinct to gather the small things.

But we have to be cautious of getting too lost in this deep connection. And we have to look at what's deeply problematic with the climate crisis - on multiple levels - but there are these little moments that can anchor us, or ground us. It's a kind of reset or restore so that we can continue that work. I think those moments are so important. It's a long winded way of saying that I had that kind of tendency to kind of look for the smaller, the unusual, just to pay attention. And want to kind of bring it into practice [...] these kind of repetitive ways of encountering or being in the world where something has shifted beyond normal perception, or seeing the world around me, that it kind of clicks into this uncanny strangeness, letting me encounter the world in a new way. I feel like, 'okay, maybe I'm onto something... might be a bit bonkers, but keep going.'

Maeve Stone: Have you seen or experienced moments where people engaging with the work have a click moment, or how it's received has left an impression on you?

Eileen Hutton: I don't know that I've seen that necessarily in response to something that I've created, and I find more value where the work becomes participatory. Where there's a tool or a conversation that treats the work as a starting point.

Maeve Stone: Can you describe one of those participation experiences?

Eileen Hutton: One work that stands out to me was looking at bees and pollinators. I think this is probably the first time I actually, like, actualised this work in a big way. It was at the Ennis Street Festival. I brought the observation hive down, and I had a series of work that was made using a microscope to take different pictures of bee parts, like the tongue, they have three tongues in one, and it's curled, and it's really beautiful. I was highlighting, zooming in on different parts that we wouldn't be able to otherwise.

Appropriating these scientific methodologies. When I'm beekeeping one of the things that kind of strikes me is that when the bees start to get agitated they give you warning signals right? Like... 'All right, enough. Back up.' And one of the things they'll do is they kind of land on your gloves and they'll start vibrating, and they buzz, right? To kind of go... 'I've had enough!' Before they would sting you. They don't want to sting you. It rips their stinger out and then they die. It's such a sensory thing. So I created these little... they're almost like little robots. Their Bee-body was a solar panel, and it was attached to a vibrating motor. And I created these bees. out of them, and then attached them to the glove, so that people could put these beekeeping gloves on and walk out into the sun and have that... sensory experience. That was one of the richest experiences that I've had talking about pollinators. People talking about the value of pollination, and their experience of this work, and... so many people would have said, 'oh, my granddad used to keep bees'. The artwork was there... But it was meant as an instigator for these conversations around what we can do to protect pollinators, and to just be curious about them. It actually shifted something in my practice... it felt more like a conversation.

Maeve Stone: That is a gorgeous moment of recognition. Has there been important working relationships or organisational relationships that have fostered your growth as an artist in this area? Have you noticed what supports that were needed to really help it grow?



Eileen Hutton: Yes, the Butler Gallery has been amazing. Hollie Kearns initially brought me in to do a soil project residency in 2021. That was the second big turning point for me in terms of trying to create a participatory project that was remote... we were still in lockdown. It's been a really pivotal point in my practice. And then from there, I was working with Hannah McCormick

and the Youth Ecology and Art Collective. Hannah founded the collective in the first instance and brought me in to do a summer school and different workshops with them. Young teenagers will really put you through the wringer. Trying to get them into those active conversations around climate and materials and...I think our arts practice can be really vulnerable. A lot of things can be felt even more intensely and that curious, questioning, kind of, unstable space has been really interesting.

Maeve Stone: There seems to be a very consistent interest in science across the work that you do. What are the juicy moments in collaborating with scientists or with data?

Eileen Hutton: I'm probably most interested in the tools that science has adapted for different ways of looking or seeing. I appropriate those tools to make work as opposed to working too much with data. I'm interested in how these tools allow me to de-centre myself as an artist.

I think we get into these ruts, these ways of thinking and ways of making. And then as soon as you can add another lens or a different tool that allows you to understand the world from a different perspective things light up again. Science has great tools...the earlier tools are very DIY. They're very rudimentary technologies... like basic microscopes or soil chromatography. They just reveal the multiplicity of layers of life.

Maeve Stone: So you've got two humans, one's a scientist and one's an artist, they both look through a microscope... What is the difference in how the information emerges through those two different people, do you think?

Eileen Hutton: Well... I did a workshop for a group of biodynamic farmers down in Kilkenny. And they wanted to look at soil chromatography. And so I was teaching them these methods, and this one... person who was there had been an engineer and had tried soil chromatography before. I showed him this general process; 'Here we go, this is what we're doing', and he was like, 'and what's the temperature of the water?'... I think he was quite skeptical of the ways that I was using the methodology, because I was interested in how it opens up a conversation and abstract ways of thinking, whereas the science was kind of more looking for reproducible methods and data collection, you know, really systematic ways of working. I am interested in process in a similar way that scientists are in terms of creative problem solving, expanding the what and how we know about the natural world.

The reason I was introduced to that context was through a group of biodynamic farmers who wanted to look at the differences between biodynamic wheat and organic wheat and biodynamic milk and organic milk through the process of chromatography. They wanted to see if that visual form of the chromatogram could show you a difference. Would you be able to tell based on form and shape and colour alone? The ones that were organic... there were sharper edges towards the form, and it was more erratic. And less formally harmonious... less symmetry. The ones that were biodynamic the colors were softer, the forms were rounder and it was so interesting! We have these rigid tools of science, and we're using them, and like you're saying, we're getting these same results. Maybe there are alternative methods that can also tell us something really vital about the systems that we're looking at.

I think we get into these ruts, these ways of thinking and ways of making. And then as soon as you can add another lens or a different tool that allows you to understand the world from a different perspective things light up again.

Maeve Stone: Is there anything else that has surprised you in terms of re-appropriating scientific method or hardware to think creatively about climate or ecology?

Eileen Hutton: I think I'm more interested in always trying to make work with others. Whether it's through soil, or through... honeybees and birds, or now with my son... to de-center myself in this position of authority. I'm interested in building that capacity for relinquishing control, and being in those unstable, unknown situations. I don't know what's going to happen. To relish the unexpected, or the surprises that come along with that way of working. It's much easier. I'm more and more interested in the ways in which we can work together in order to de-center positionality, especially in artistic practice.

Maeve Stone: Who inspires you in that work?

Eileen Hutton: Loads of people. I am part of a lot of different groups that meet regularly. I don't want this to come across as Pollyanna -overly hopeful- but in the face of climate catastrophe and what's happening... there's so many people that are working towards imagining new futures. I'm part of a Bio Regional Learning Alliance. That's a group of people - I think there's 10 of us - across the globe working with bioregioning as a practice, and working within different communities. The work that they're doing is absolutely phenomenal. It's so, so varied and so site-specific.

Two other groups, an Art & Ecology Working group through ELIA, the European League of Institutes of the Arts and PALs (Partnership for Academic Leadership in Sustainability). Both groups are looking at how to embed sustainability across art and design curriculum. We've been working for the past 2 years either to workshop curricula, or to test things, or put together new packets of information, or share across material resources. Just to have a bank of knowledge coming from people who are really deeply interested in sustainability in education. I think that's phenomenal and that gives me hope.

Maeve Stone: And finally, what reading or references would you recommend to fellow artists or other people working and interested in this space?

Eileen Hutton: It has to be adrienne marie brown. It's the second time today I've actually recommended her book; Emergent Strategy. It is amazing for community work and she talks about biomimicry principles and working biodynamically in our processes and ways of collectively being together. It's incredible, and it's so gentle. And anyone interested in this field would find the book Ecoart in Action- a useful place to start.

She also wrote this beautiful essay 'We Will Not Cancel Us'. She was talking about understanding one another. We're all on the same planet. We need to figure out ways to work things out. You don't have to love and adore everybody, but you have to listen to diverse perspectives, you have to hear contradictory opinions and still work with these people. I find that so reassuring. We can't separate out the things that feel beautiful and safe and lovely. We have to be able to hold the complexity.





LOUIS HAUGH

POWER IN THE LOCAL

Maeve Stone: I'm interested to know if you have an early memory of a private relationship with nature beginning?

Louis Haugh: I think the earliest memory I have of the relationship that we have with nature being reciprocal is collecting rose petals in a plastic bucket. And filling it up with water and leaving it under a bush overnight to make perfume. I was a really young kid... It was epiphany moment when I realised 'oh my god, we can make things with nature!'. So I just gathered my tools and equipment and went off and made something.

The other one was I remember very distinctly holding up a colour 35mm negative against the window, using the window as a light box. And just being totally perplexed as to how this tiny thing that's kind of dark and amber and weird equals this slightly bigger, colourful photograph that I can recognise as a picture of me, or a picture of our family. And it was this process of trying to figure it out as I looked really closely. The closer I looked, the more I could see... 'Oh, well, that's that shape' and I started to recognise shapes, and then I started to figure out there was different colours in the negative. I think nature and looking was always a starting point for me.

Maeve Stone: What is nature like as a collaborator?

Louis Haugh: Hmm, that's a good question but I don't know if I would use the word collaborator. I'm just so eternally grateful to the natural world, and I don't think that I'm giving back to the natural world as much as I'm getting from it, in that sense. So, I almost feel like I'm working in partnership or with the help of nature. Or with the permission of nature. But I feel like it would almost be egotistical to say that I'm working in collaboration with nature... maybe something like making 'with the hopeful permission of nature'.

Maeve Stone: I am really keen to hear a bit more about how you began working with communities in an ecological way...

Louis Haugh: I started as a photographer and more than 10 years ago I was photographing other artists working with people. I just remember being behind the camera, thinking 'I could do that'. It was a realisation through observation, or learning by looking. That's how I learn everything. You can learn so much about people and humans and groups and behaviours, or the natural world, or ecosystems, just by taking the time to look closely. And I guess that's what I was doing through photography. I was looking closely at other people working in this context.

Then eventually I started changing the format or the structure of the way I worked with people, and it was more of a kind of reciprocal kind of arrangement. Previously, the approach I had was "I'm collaborating with this group of people, and together we have made this thing". And I still do that, for sure, but the issue with that is I have to be so careful then, because it's not mine. It's not my artwork, it's not my idea, it's not my painting, it's ours. And that's a very delicate and sensitive thing to take care of, and you don't always have agency or control over it. For example to use it for something else, or include it in an exhibition, that's when you have to just be really kind of careful of those parameters.

So that's when I started working with groups of people in a more, kind of, reciprocal exchange agreement, I'll help them do this thing... And it might be something they do on their own, or they do with me, and that's something they can take away, and that's actually not my responsibility to take care of anymore, it's their responsibility to take care of. But in exchange for that, I get something else out of it. It's kind of like a reciprocal exchange, and they learn something, or take something away from the session. And I learn something, and I take something different away from the session.

Maeve Stone: You make work that, for me, seems to invite people in, it plays with curiosity and wonder and has an inviting quality to it that people want to get closer and want to know what's going on. How do you begin that kind of process?

Louis Haugh: I mean, it's a nice question, because I guess you have to be so confident and on the ball as an artist, even though none of us are that confident. You have to be confident presenting. When you're working with groups of people it can be challenging to feel like you need to bring everything to the table, and then with that challenge, you kind of... forget that you don't have to bring everything to the table. And it's... it's in those moments when you know, the most cynical person in the room comes up with something really beautiful. You know? When the least involved person in a group does something that's really kind of groundbreaking in that kind of point of tension or struggle.

I was working on one project with a group and we were building a community garden together. So I decided to just, um, pretend I didn't know how to use tools very well. I just started jamming the drill into the wood, even though I'm pretty good with a drill. And they're like, "Jesus Christ, what do you do? No, that's not how you do it! Here, give me that, give me that". And then... all of a sudden, they were all hands on deck.

Or, you know, you're working with a group of teenagers, or a group of primary school kids, and just one or two down the back who are like, "that's stupid, why are we doing this, that's crap" but then he plays football, and he started doing all these tricks with a pinecone on his hand, and I was taking pictures. And then he was seeing the pictures in real time, and he's like, "oh, that's deadly! What if I do this? And can I do it that way, and can I have two?" And all of a sudden, it wasn't me asking him to do things, or offering, or suggesting. He was then generating the ideas for the photoshoot.

I just remember being behind the camera, thinking 'I could do that'. It was a realisation through observation, or learning by looking. That's how I learn everything, really... You can learn so much about people and humans and groups and behaviours, or the natural world, or ecosystems, just by taking the time to look closely.

Maeve Stone: Is there a ritual or a practice that you have in nature that sustains you?

Louis Haugh: I walk my dog every day by the canal, and it's just a really nice way to connect. I live in the city, you know, one of the least green areas of Dublin is Dublin 8.

But nature is just tenacious, do you know what I mean? Talk about putting one foot in front of the other, and just getting shit done. Nature doesn't take a day off when it's feeling a bit tired or unwell. Every day is a sunrise, and every night is a sunset for nature... it doesn't skip it. And, you know, the berries are coming out, and the food is becoming more plentiful, and the nuts are coming on the trees. Even if I'm sitting at home in a mood thinking "for fuck's sake, like, you know, this... this weather, is it ever gonna end? Is summer ever gonna get here?" But actually spring is here, or summer is here, and all you have to do is step outside the door and look for it.

Maeve Stone: I love that word. Tenacious. I'm really curious about how nature thrives in urban contexts like that. What would you like to see growing in your community into the future?

Louis Haugh: I think we kind of allow ourselves to reach a point of inaction. Because of all these terrible things are happening in the world. And that's not to undermine these terrible things, of course, they're awful. But that doesn't mean that we can't clean up our canal. And yeah, cleaning up our canal isn't gonna make a difference. It's a drop in the ocean in a global context... But you can have such an immediate and positive effect on your local ecosystems with very little action, and sometimes no action.

I think my vision for Dublin, or my hope for Dublin, is that people just stop thinking about the bigger picture, and just focus on their local community and their local ecosystems and their local waterways, and just care a little bit more, and work a little bit harder to protect them.

Because these really beautiful and small actions - I was going to say worthless... meaning in the global context it's pointless. But in a local scenario it's absolutely priceless.

Maeve Stone: Beautiful. You're working on a triptych of films at the moment, can you tell us more?

Louis Haugh: Yeah, well, most of the practical decisions I make around work are financially inspired. You know, it sounds nice when I say I'm making a film in three parts. That's because I couldn't get the money to make it in one part! But it enriches the process, and I'm sure the work will be better for it even if it wasn't my first decision.

Maeve Stone: And final question... Is there anyone you'd like to point people towards that has been a source of inspiration for you and your work?

Louis Haugh: The person that I'm always really excited to introduce people to, is Suzanne Simard. She is one of the main contemporary voices and researchers describing and tracking how trees communicate under the soil.

I've made a lot of work, particularly with young kids, about trees, and the kinds of mycelial networks. I just think those types of researchers who are knee-deep in whatever dangers they're knee-deep in... to not only educate themselves, but to educate the world, and to bring new meaning and understanding to the way we consider or think about the natural world, so that we can better protect it. I just think that's the most inspiring type of work. All of the work I make is in honour of, or in respect of that work. And I'm always really delighted to bring these ideas and introduce people to those thinkers through creative practice.

But nature is just tenacious, do you know what I mean? Talk about putting one foot in front of the other, and just getting shit done. Nature doesn't take a day off when it's feeling a bit tired or unwell. Every day is a sunrise, and every night is a sunset for nature... it doesn't skip it.

A vertical photograph of a forest floor. In the foreground, there is a large, rounded log covered in thick, vibrant green moss. Several thin, bare tree branches lie across the moss. In the background, numerous tree trunks of varying heights and thicknesses are visible, creating a dense forest scene. The lighting is soft and diffused, typical of a forest interior.

CATHERINE CLEARY

POCKET FORESTS

Maeve Stone: Your background is journalism - how did you arrive at Pocket Forests? Was there a moment that landed you there?

Catherine Cleary: Yeah, my journalism kind of jumped around a fair amount from being a sort of news and finance journalist in my early career to writing about crime and social issues. Until my eldest was born, and he's 23 next month, so that's 23 years ago, madly. Um, when I took a... I basically left staff journalism, because I wanted to spend time with my newborn, and work as a freelancer.

My big interest was actually land and farming and what we're doing with our food system. So I was doing that in 2019, and I ended up going to... I had also written about the Millennium Tree Project, which was in the year 2000—every household got a tree—and I had been on the mailing list with Declan Little who ran that and kept in touch with it. I did a sort of "where is my millennium tree 10 years on" piece. So I was always on his list and in 2019, I signed up for one of his native woodland training courses, not really knowing why I was there. I wasn't really there as a forester or landowner or ecologist. But something in that visit to a regenerated oak forest kind of was one of those moments of, well, yeah, I really want to do something in this space. I don't know why, you know, there are only so many pieces I can write about this as a journalist, I actually want to do things rather than write about other people who are doing these things.

And that's sort of set off something. And then COVID hit and my food writing—my restaurant column—pivoted... And my co-founder Ash came across the idea of the tiny forest model. And we started investigating who was doing it in Ireland, who was doing it in Europe... and yeah, it just made the mad leap into it being a project. Nobody else was doing it in Dublin at the time. And, yeah, in that COVID spirit, and also living in the south inner city, which is the least green space in Ireland. It seemed like a really good use of the limited amount of green space to be doing. So yeah, it was just one of those intriguing magic "let's do this" kind of mad bits basically.

Maeve Stone: You talk about the Inner City and the lack of green space. One of the things that really struck me in the research out there was the connection between social justice and access to trees. Is that something that's being proved in your experience with the Pocket Forest Project?

Catherine Cleary: Very much so. There's a report in the Irish Times today about the absolute deprivation that's in this area. You know, it's the lowest secondary school attendance (40%), highest level of drug deaths in Ireland, crime rate is twice what it is at the national average. So, you know, there's a direct mapping of social deprivation with nature deprivation. It's a very brutal kind of uncaring landscape that's been created in this part of the city, you know, with its industrial heritage, I suppose, or that sense that the people who lived here didn't matter as much as the people in the leafier suburbs. There was a sense that this was a luxury or a magnet for antisocial behavior... all of the reasons that are still being rehearsed about why we can't have trees in these parts of the city. But I think those arguments are now crumbling and we hope that the Pocket Forest movement... would really help people to embrace it as well from a policy level as well as at a community level. Because, you know, it brings together this idea of urban greening in a much more nature-based way, but also a community-based way as well.

Maeve Stone: The biggest project that I've come across for your work, was it 24,000 trees that were planted in Roscommon? Has that been the most ambitious project, or has there been bigger?

Catherine Cleary: Yeah, that's a kind of a sidebar to Pocket Forests. My husband and I, similarly in that COVID time, were thinking about trying to persuade people we knew who had land to plant trees and then bumped up against the resistances there. We never thought we'd end up here just buying the cheapest land we could find and getting a license to plant native woodland on it.

But it's very much a sister project. We spoke to a student yesterday who's looking at is there a way to connect the wilding that might be happening in rural Ireland with something similar in urban areas? Corrie, as we call the site of Roscommon, is very much a sister project because it's generating materials.

We've just put some new signs in our raised beds across the road here in Thomas Street, and the posts that we've used are, you know, small birch trees that we've cut down in the woodland to try and let more light in. It feels really special, and you know to be able to start to grow some willow that we'll hopefully use to do bits of willow fencing up in the urban areas as well. Each year, these projects bring you places that you never expected to go to and offer this kind of sense of abundance.

Maeve Stone: I'm curious, with that, like, what are the most surprising things that you've learned? What are the unexpected moments?

Catherine Cleary: I think it's the energy that happens every time we do a workshop, whether it's preparing an area for planting or planting or going back again now that summer is here to see them all leafing up. Just that universality of people's reaction to it; it's a sort of a magical happy joy that happens when even in the rain and we're muddy and we're cold and we've got all these bloody trees to plant.

This work should be ordinary, I suppose, you know, this work wasn't out of the ordinary for many generations, but it is for our generation. Especially if you're an inner city kid who has no garden and has never touched soil. It's an extraordinary experience to be involved in planting a forest that's going to be there hopefully past your time. So yeah, it's a very hopeful discovery for me that this works for everybody. It's not just "middle class nice ladies".

I just interviewed Anthony Freeman O'Brien, who does the beekeeping here in the digital hub. He talked about his sense of privilege that he's in this world of nature now. He struggles with money, but he actually feels really rich, and I think that's the thing that has really surprised me—that sense of richness that comes back in waves from you. It's not a burden of fixing biodiversity loss; you just plug into the energy of it and it all comes back in much more abundance.

Maeve Stone: What's your starting point?

Catherine Cleary: I think we learn every time. It always helps that we're always outdoors. Especially in schools where teachers tell us it's the kids who really struggle with being in the classroom who really lean into and love this kind of approach.

We just recently did a workshop about this idea of sharing power and not coming in as the saviors of nature. Most of the forests now, we plant them in a circular formation, like the one in Ballymun that you would have seen. There's something interesting about standing in a circle... In order to share information in a circle, you have to be in the circle. You're not coming in as the expertise. We found ourselves asking people to close their eyes and imagine they're in the space, and then imagine the energy moving up from the soil through their bodies. It's a bit of magic, because we've all done the shared exercise where you're all trying to breathe in the same way. The vibrations are all slightly aligned before we start to work, and that really helps.

Maeve Stone: Has that always worked, or has there been moments that have been more challenging?

Catherine Cleary: There was one project we did where there was a change of staff at a residential center for people with learning disabilities. There didn't seem to be a great level of handover, and the person who came along just got rid of it. They basically just whipped out all the trees and put grass in. That was probably the worst-case scenario. But again, it's a very young project—our oldest forest is only five years old, so we don't know how that's going to go in terms of what the trees are going to look like in future years.

Maeve Stone: Do you find that your storytelling, or your journalism, or your writing in general has changed over the course of your experience?

Catherine Cleary: Yes. Part of my motivation to move into "doing" rather than "writing" was feeling a bit hopeless about the power of words. Though, my fascination with trees was actually inspired by a story—Richard Powers' book *The Overstory*. Stories can move people. I'm not going to write a listicle about my favorite restaurants ever again; it feels like bullshit. Now I really only write about urban greening or trees. It's a privilege to have an editor who takes those pieces. I find the writing is informed by a lighter view of the world now. I meet so many people and have so many conversations that feed into the work.

I can't get enough of stories about how much working in nature helps people. As Valerie Niell said during a workshop: "If you don't mind the place, it doesn't mind you." That reciprocal idea of care—and care being embraced by men and people who were culturally told that "caring" isn't their work—is rattling around in my head all the time.

Maeve Stone: Before I let you go... is there a person or a place or something written, or any form of art, that you return to for solace or for grounding?

Catherine Cleary: I just recently finished *Curation of the Aurora in Places* and it's a book that I will read maybe every year for the rest of my life. [Mary Oliver](#)'s work, too. Meeting people across the board, and my friend Bernadette, who made the documentary about the Rossfellan project... the conversations there about land and legacy and grief are incredibly interesting. Music-wise, the [Caoimhín Ó Raghallaigh](#) album would be kind of the soundtrack to our day.



I can't get enough of stories about how much working in nature helps people. As Valerie Niell said during a workshop: "If you don't mind the place, it doesn't mind you." That reciprocal idea of care—and care being embraced by men and people who were culturally told that "caring" isn't their work—is rattling around in my head all the time.

A photograph of a damselfly and a dragonfly on a yellow reed. The damselfly is light blue and green, perched on the reed. The dragonfly is yellow and green, also on the reed. The background is a soft, out-of-focus landscape with water and reeds.

ANNE CLEARY/ DENIS CONNOLLY

THE SCHOOL OF LOOKING

Maeve Stone: You've recently begun working in a more embedded way in community - has that changed how you work?

Denis Connolly: Last year, with the Catchments project, we moved toward communities facing significant barriers: the Traveller community, the Down syndrome community, the autistic community in Limerick, and refugees in Wicklow and Meath. Communities that aren't as connected to freshwater ecology or biodiversity, because of challenges that they face in their lives, not through lack of interest.

Maeve Stone: How do you balance the challenge of working with communities and generating a creative income? Is that a tension in the work for you?

Anne Cleary: I think that balance has to happen within our collaborative practice. I would have a more engaged idea for connecting with community, whereas Denis would probably be more focused on the form or formal aspects of filmmaking. So we're playing this off between the two of us all the time. But then that is also complicated further by the expectations of funders and the stakeholders and all of that. They are constantly applying their needs or desires. So it's extremely complicated, I have to say.

Maeve Stone: How do you plan and set up your encounters with new collaborators?

Denis Connolly: We always start with a walk. We all go for a walk together on the riverside beside the old river Shannon, or along the Dodder or by the lakeside. I think that makes a strong bond initially.

We always start with a walk.

Anne Cleary: We don't really necessarily have a strict plan and we actually almost never really complete pre-made plans, because so many other things happen. You know, people are like, 'Oh, my God, look at this mushroom!'. So then we start photographing something else. Or people go in their own direction, you know, we spot a kingfisher or whatever. So, in fact, we often don't complete the we're intending to do, because everything else comes.

Denis Connolly: I mean, I remember, at the Lee Fields in Cork with teenagers and children from the Traveller community - we were crossing the bridge on the way to the Lee Fields - and somebody spotted a cormorant fishing, and we spent a long time staring at the cormorant. For some reason they knew they'd seen these but they'd never seen them fishing before.

And for some reason, the sun was shining in a particular way that you could see the cormorant when he dived under the water. You could see him moving along. I've never seen that before. You know, looking down on the river from a bridge and seeing the long time they spend underwater. And it was, for me, absolutely fascinating. The kids just who'd been very rowdy up to that point went quiet and just spent 10 minutes watching this cormorant fishing. That was not programmed. You can't program these things, when nature is your collaborator, all bets are off.

Maeve Stone: Sometimes when you're working with vulnerable communities, it can be challenging to shape or frame the work so that there is a clear ritual of ending or closing. Is that something that you guys have encountered, or something that you've thought about in your own practice?

Anne Cleary: Yes, that is a complicated thing, and also it's very different depending on the community and their needs. With the Down Syndrome Community they're extremely emotionally attaching, and, you know, they really love you, and you really get to love them.

And so, the moment you're involved with somebody from the Down Syndrome Community, you're involved in the whole family, because they're very family centered. We really felt we built that project up over time and and we felt the need to really produce something at the end and give them a kind of event, you know, with tea and talks so that there could really be a flowering of that relationship. And now we're continuing that relationship with that group, hopefully through a further project with the young people involved. I mean, one of our two of them became very attached to us in particular.

Denis Connolly: They were young adults, like 18 to 24 and they were still, as they will always be, in the care of their parents. They're full of childlike affection. And yet there was the fact that they will never be autonomous. That was something for us to adapt to, which is very different from any other community we worked with, working with adults who are so full of affection and are very loved and very loving. This is so interesting because, you know, that group of young adults, they have aspirations and ambitions, like all young adults, you know, and they want to get jobs and they want to get education but there's challenges in those aspirations. So it's really interesting to see how they're negotiating it.

Maeve Stone: Are there other challenges that recur in the work you make with community?

Anne Cleary: The other challenge, which I think you probably face yourself as well, is just audiences. And you know, we felt that in the work we do, that we found the whole relationship to audience can be very challenging and frustrating.

If your mind focuses on small things, let that be your way in. Don't try to tackle things directly. Go through the small things like the dragonflies, the quadrats, the walks and the big things will come up from there.

Because, as Denis mentioned, often you're basically just preaching to the converted. We're a whole bunch of like minded hippy-dippy people getting together to make art. But, I mean, is that beneficial? It was often more beneficial for us than it was for them, because we would often be talking to people who knew much more about the local environment, and the transfer of knowledge was towards us. So that's part of the reason why we feel it's much more valuable to reach out now to other groups and bring them physically into Nature. So people who wouldn't necessarily go for a walk along the river and look at biodiversity as a group.

Maeve Stone: Is there anyone that you've taken inspiration from in your ecological work?

Denis Connolly: I do remember there was a book that would have been the big inspiration for us to get into the particular way we decided to approach eco-art. It was by Amitav Ghosh The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable. His thesis was: how can artists help in the whole question of climate change, when it seems far too big for them... and a lot of the book is about how difficult it is to take on big issues as artists. When our minds tend to kind of focus on small things really. He was particularly talking about the writer's mind - it tends to focus on small things, then that's your way in. Don't go to the big things, go through the small things and the big things can come up from there. So I think that was it really. And I think it's really important, because I come back to that again and again.

Anne Cleary: Recently with all the world events happening one starts to feel kind of tiny and helpless and maybe a little disillusioned with the work. Coming back again to focus on tiny things is helpful. We're preparing this workshop where we're going to work with various communities, looking really closely at tiny tiny things using macro photography.

When you're in a group looking really closely at a thing you create an almost out of body experience. It's so tiny and so important. With Eco Showboat we wanted to create a workshop called 'Slow Looking' but it was really hard. With people it can be hard to slow them down. So that's something we're working on in an ongoing way. We both need to slow down too. When we were working with kids in Askeaton we set up a white page with the macro lens above and they could see it on the screen above. So they can make a composition and zoom right in on it. We have a portable printer so they can print it out on A5 paper and bring it home to show their Mum and Dad. It's technology that we use to try to slow people down and help them look again, more slowly.

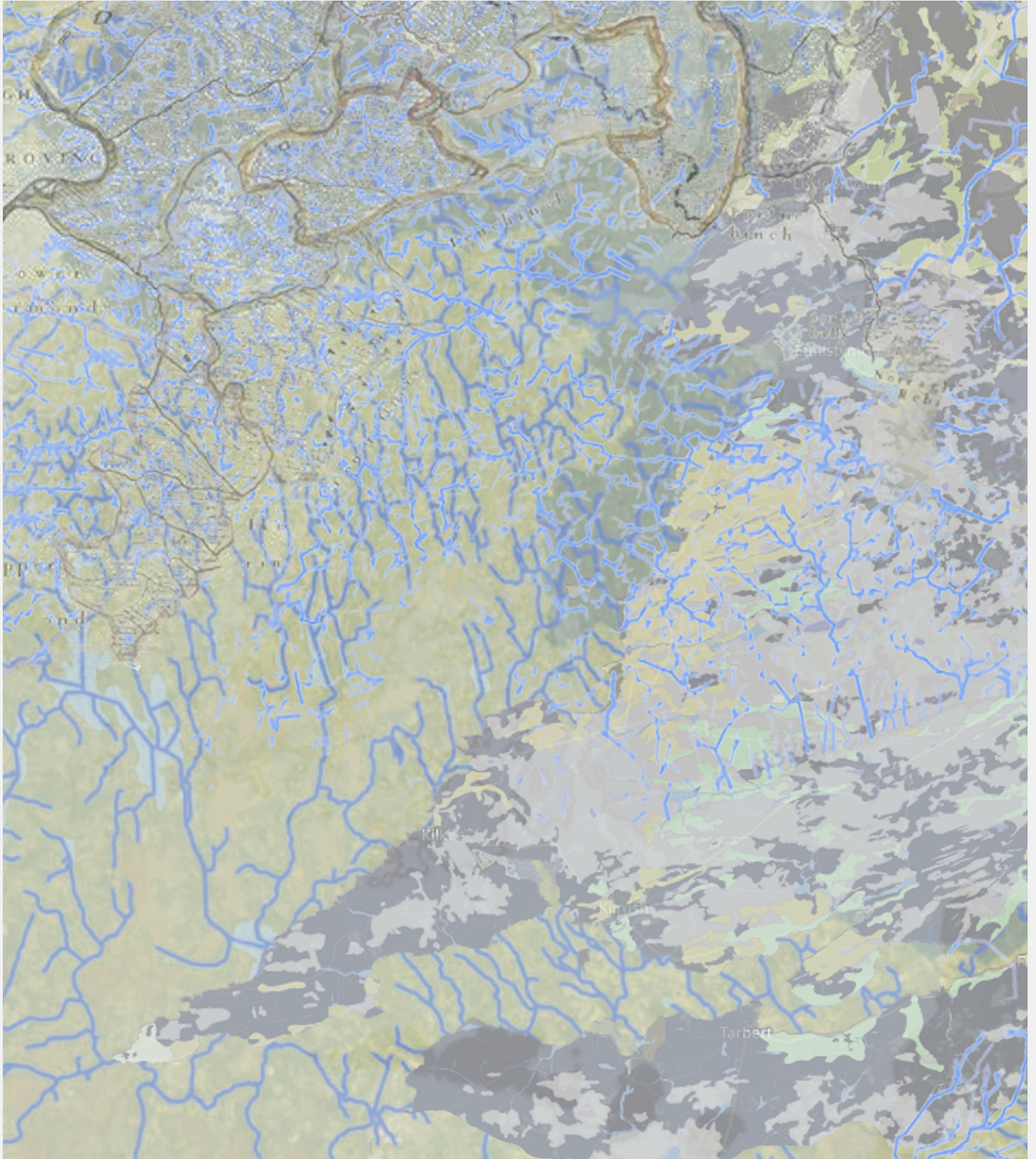
Denis Connolly: With macro photography there is such a shallow depth of field and that's what makes it difficult but that's also what makes it work because you really have to focus on the thing you're looking at.

Maeve Stone: What advice would you give to someone starting out?

Anne Cleary: My advice is to keep at it. Keep at it and don't get disillusioned. There's loads of failure along the way and you just have to keep at it because it's worth it in the end. Being an artist, if you can make it work, despite all the challenges, is the most beautiful and satisfying life because you really are giving something to people with this kind of work even though it's very hard.

Denis Connolly: And not to get too lonely. To reach out to people like you're doing Maeve. And to be amazed by other people. We were amazed by your work.

When you're in a group looking really closely at a thing you create an almost out of body experience. It's so tiny and so important. It abstracts you from its grounds.



An image made from composit maps which was used as part of the 'Climate Art Assembly' research project with Roots For The Future Collective at Project Arts Centre



CATHY FITZGERALD

HAUMEA ECOVERSITY

Maeve Stone: My starting place here was thinking about the organic responses to Storm Eowyn, which really hit us quite badly. I think it was a rude awakening for a lot of people, and equally more recently, I think the fuel shortages hit here quite quickly, because I guess there was panic, and again, very real living experience for people in terms of how delicate and precarious our access to resources can be.

Cathy Fitzgerald: Yes, in many ways, I believe our current education does not relate to this scale and rate of environmental breakdown. Our education is largely failing us, which is worrying because the environmental scientific information has been available for so long. The sense of urgency, the clarity, isn't there, and a lot of people in politics don't have basic ecoliteracy (systems) education either; rather, short-term thinking and neoliberal ideals remain the dominant narrative.

Maeve Stone: So, that's the context and the place I'm responding from. I guess these conversations that I'm having are in service of the idea of peer-to-peer learning for artists working in ecological spaces, trying to gather, trying to share working methods, care and advice.

Cathy Fitzgerald: Well, that word 'service' for me... brings me back to Suzi Gablik, the curator who wrote the seminal book *The Reenchantment of Art* in the 90s. She was responding in part to the eminent ecological and cultural historian Thomas Berry and realised there was an 'ecological imperative' – to employ our creativity to 'serve' life. She observed and reflected on the emergent expanded co-creative practices that were moving from self-expression to those that heal and serve life.

"The Great Work now, as we move into a new millennium, is to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner." Thomas Berry - The Great Work

And if you look at her introduction 'Changing Paradigms, Breaking the Cultural Trance', it's still as fresh and poignant to realise today's lack of ecological education in the arts largely remains, decades later. I remember reading that she talked to an anthropologist to consider a more Indigenous feeling of creative practice and rituals to keep people in tune with seeing all life around them, as sacred. So again, we're only at the beginning to approach an ecological, holistic turn in education, and that's tricky for a lot of people who lack an ecological perspective to be aware of how much education has to change.

Maeve Stone: You've been working to challenge the lack of ecological education in education. Can you tell me more about it?

Cathy Fitzgerald: From my PhD and my struggles to develop an ecological creative practice, I realised that there was a missing capacity in arts education to fully engage in the existential challenges that we face. From 2020, I've self-directed essential ecoliteracy learning courses that have become a peer-to-peer learning community - Haumea Ecovarsity. I also sensed that there was something in the New Zealand culture that I grew up in - that Māori Indigenous ecological wisdom is still a living thing, that overcoming our alienation from the living world is essentially a spiritual crisis. This wisdom is in Ireland, too, but this land has been colonised for so long, and it's what people like Manchán Magan were excavating. He, too, turned to Australian Aboriginal people who still cultivate rituals that remind them of how to live well within Earth's cycles. So I am teaching people ecological literacy, a holistic approach to those who feel called to do something for their community and the places that support them. Chiefly, I facilitate ecoliteracy to those who have come out of mainstream education and realise something fundamental is missing, or to those who have got an eco-climate arts grant and don't quite know what they're doing yet, or those who wish to get a lot of meaning from their creativity and live well with life. Some are wishing to do work that will benefit the next generation.

Maeve Stone: Building hope?

Cathy Fitzgerald: No, I do not like that word. I would be with quite a lot of ecological thinkers who would think more about agency and empowerment than hope. What I put forward through Haumea Ecovarsity is that ecoliteracy needs an emphasis on contemplative practices to help learners maintain their wellbeing despite how confronting reality is, and offer context, language and ecological ethics to support and guide their work. And growing numbers of creative approaches too.

Maeve Stone: I'm curious, what for you are the most human-centric traps in our language and communication when you're working with people to build ecological awareness.

Cathy Fitzgerald: Well, first, I try to tell people to use the word 'ecological' rather than 'environmental', to convey that we are addressing unprecedented intersecting social and environmental challenges. I often invite them initially to use the words from the Earth Charter so we can think about acting for the entire 'community of life' and future generations. Many others and I find the Earth Charter useful for its compassionate ecological vision and its clear and accessible ecological language. During my PhD, I made deliberate choices to use frameworks that were well recognised in sustainability education, so I looked for something that had international acceptance [the Earth Charter is three-times endorsed by UNESCO for sustainability education], and that led me to explore more why eminent ecological thinkers, peace activists, Indigenous wisdom keepers, ethicists, educators, faith, law and science leaders contributed to the Earth Charter. The preamble of the Earth Charter, for instance, talks about reverence and responsibility toward all life on this planet as 'one Earth community' - so it's a very simple language that progresses radical, key holistic ecological thinking foundations for an enormous shift in global education's priorities. Others may want to come up with their own terms, but I feel that reinventing the wheel is not the thing we should be doing in these really urgent times. The Earth Charter is also emblematic in its formation, if arose from a unique global civil society process, of listening to all voices. Ireland's ecoliteracy journey is still in its early stages, and I'm delighted to have worked with artist and Gaeilgeoir Phoebe Cope on the official Irish translation of the Earth Charter.

"This poor land has been colonised for so long and that's what people like Manchán were excavating. I think that's why he was still turning to Aboriginal people, people who were still living with those types of really lived rituals."

Maeve Stone: What was the process of awakening that led you to see nature, ecology, and its role in your own development in the way you do now?

Cathy Fitzgerald: Well, early on, I had a background in research science, and I came to Ireland in the mid-90s, but I couldn't get work in that area. I ended up in Mohill in Co Leitrim to work, and that's where I met Australian Jan Alexander, who is still a good friend. She founded Crann and went on the Late, Late TV Show in the mid-80s to ask the Irish nation about why they were importing ash trees from Wales and, more broadly, why we weren't planting native trees in Ireland. Our friendship and motivation for change remains as we were both lucky to be born in lands with large areas of near-pristine forests. Jan also inspired the largest community native tree-planting project in Ireland at that time, The Local Project, and I came 10 years later. I was appointed to look after the Crann native tree craft wood shop in Mohill, and also invited to raise awareness about protecting hedgerows. For the first time, I found myself employing my artistic skills for ecological concerns, drawing hedgerow shrubs and trees for a calendar that went into two printings. Back then, I didn't know Irish native trees, apart from oak and holly, so I was lucky to be working alongside four people who were incredibly pioneering in their ecological thinking that translated into real change on the ground. Jan continues to draw a lot of traditional ecological knowledge from trees and Aboriginal wisdom keepers.

Maeve Stone: How do you deal with burnout? I'm always endlessly grateful to hear about how others mind themselves.

Cathy Fitzgerald: It has been very unexpected, this ecoliteracy teaching thing- who would have thought that doing a creative practice PhD in art and ecology, that there would be anything at the end of it! But Haumea Ecovercity is my support. I am enthused by my peers and collaborators and I'm lucky my husband sculptor-geologist Martin Lytle is so involved too.

I get the chance to exchange learning with incredible creatives, changemakers, curators, educators and cultural researchers. In recent years, I've been fortunate to bring ecoliteracy and the Earth Charter to IMMA's Earth Rising and also to several Local Authorities. For the latter, I have a strong belief that we learn, create and act to live well with life when we are deeply connected and know how local places support us. It is similarly encouraging that bioregional understanding is beginning to flourish. So as part of all this, despite knowing we are in a time of great unravelling, I feel, as Margaret Wheatley would say, that I'm working in a 'small island of sanity' or coherence with what matters most. I agree with her too, that the answer 'lies in community'; it's slow work, deep listening to people, knowing and caring better for places- it's full of 'wisdom, beauty and love'. I also get a lot of living with a thriving, birdsong filled small forest - the inspiration from my ongoing Hollywood Forest Story work, and working with others in peatland restoration for Carlow's small Drummin Bog.

Maeve Stone: It's an important foundation for not losing you mind, that sense connection, and also the kind of the joyfulness and the playfulness that can emerge when you're with other people...

Cathy Fitzgerald: Yes, I sign my Haumea Ecovercity Newsletter with 'in joyful perseverance'. Though sometimes I don't feel it with the news of the world. I remember towards the end of my PhD, around 2016, I was in quite a lot of despair. I stopped talking, and I got sick. But then I joined an online course with the Pachamama Alliance, and I just made myself, every week, say something. And then I wrote to the California-based course facilitator, philosopher Nikos Patedakis, and I said, " You don't know how much this means to me to be in a community where people actually get it [the ecological emergency]". And we are still talking as Nikos became and remains my founding co-facilitator for Haumea Ecovercity's vision and the magic that happens when we gather to face what matters most.

"My Haumea Ecosystem is my Sangha. It's my support. I am enthused by my collaborators. And my husband is involved. I get the chance to work with with people like Grace, with the local authorities, and of course, we moan but I very much feel part of the new culture or the Earth Charter international family."

Maeve Stone: What have you seen working as models for consensus, because that's for me, one of the things that can feel tricky is moving from agreement or discussion into action, and often it's to do with what are the tools or mechanisms for consensus that are there?

Cathy Fitzgerald: I think listening first, listening to what people care about and know about their places, their homes, and bringing them together, in safe, creative spaces, is crucial for braver, collective action. I keep a beady eye out for what's already there, as some of it may be buried or overlooked. Often, when you bring people together, they may not know what wise cultural heritage they have. I think there's growing awareness of what's coming up from the land, some of it may be forgotten wisdom, and some of it may be with older people who are not listened to.

Maeve Stone: I guess my hope with with some of these questions and these interviews is to create not a consensus, but a map of of ideas and and approaches for people that are maybe at the beginning, because it is a hard thing to begin.

Cathy Fitzgerald: For somebody who was coming to me and is new to ecological thinking, I would say start close in, with something to hand that you can continue your passion with over the long term. Often, people come to me with solid, creative practices and some, particularly those in theatre, dance or community arts or education, are already working collectively, which helps when these practices often expand beyond a solitary studio practice. For some, from the visual arts, when they come to this topic, they may quite quickly realise how little they may know about a habitat. This work will often invite them to collaborate with environmental experts, which in turn can be motivating and supportive for the scale of challenges we face. So becoming more ecoliterate means becoming more comfortable with co-creative, dialogical practices and a greater understanding that creativity for this context is not necessarily creating art objects but shifting the conversation toward awareness and care for life's fundamental interconnection.

Maeve Stone: I have a emotionally rooted, maybe even spiritual question to finish us out, what does real, connected listening feel like in your body?

Cathy Fitzgerald: I think it's like a tingly excitement? It's like I can picture a spider's web, and I sense a sparking of life's mysterious interwovenness touching something I'm excited by. For example, I've long worked with Carlow- based community artist and painter Jules Michael, and later this year she's expanding creative community engagement for the Carlow Drummin Bog peatland restoration project. We've both been working on this since 2017, and she's just got some funding to work with a local canoe operator to bring people from the nearby riverside settlement and some local authority staff down the Barrow River, near the bog. Correspondingly, I've just been facilitating an 'Evening Thoughts' online ecoliteracy course on deep time and dark skies to expand our thinking for future night walks at Drummin Bog. And Jules recently said to me, "Cathy, I've just heard this part of the Barrow River is known as The Stars!" And that's awe and wonder, a felt spiritual sense of experiencing the magic of a river, and which we can also link to ancestral experience - to those who lived and were supported by these same lands, waters and skies.



It's got potential to bring us together under a dark sky. And that's your awe and wonder, and that's your spiritual connection. It is what brings me back to indigenous thought, that sense of awe and wonder and dark skies being some of the last places where people can actually feel that.



ANNE KEARNS

*CO-CENTRE FOR CLIMATE
BIODIVERSITY + WATER*

Maeve Stone: How did your work in climate engagement begin?

Anne Kearns: Technically, my first job as a 16-year-old was in Burrenbeo. I came back into climate work much later by chance through community work. The commonality in everything I have ever done are communities and systems thinking. From that point of view, if you want to work with communities or on behalf of communities, you work with what they care about and what's important to them. Climate has become more and more important to people. It was always of importance but I think it's recognised by the communities more now, or there may be better vocabulary about it.

I think our climate literacy stuff has expanded greatly in this country. I think we're very good at knowing there's a climate problem and talking about climate. I don't think we're very good on the environmental literacy side of that. What does climate actually mean for you, for me, for Joe down the road? When we say sea level rises, does that mean we won't have any beaches? Does it mean just our beaches move? Environmental thinking has to be a part of the approach if you work in place-based work and community work.

Maeve Stone: What have you noticed changing in the work you do with communities?

Anne Kearns: They are starting to trust themselves an awful lot more... that they can be the expert in place and bring in the expertise they need. Not everyone, but quite a lot, have become more confident in saying: "This is a specific problem, and we need expertise in this," and then listening to that expertise. It's also not as hard to convince people that climate change is happening.

Where I find that block most is actually in professional services that you wouldn't think would need to be convinced of climate as a priority: certain teachers and engineers. There is a real tension, I find, between national policy, local policy, and what people are seeing on the ground. That tension can sometimes be conflated as an argument against climate, and I actually don't think it's the same thing. I think people are just inundated with information and they just want simple answers. If they're not getting simple answers, the change now is that people are ready to go, "Okay, well, we'll find it for ourselves."

Maeve Stone: Have you seen artists being one of the key ingredients in responding to the needs of community in navigating climate resilience?

Anne Kearns: Yes and no. I think detrimentally to artists they can still be seen just as tools within the information deficit of climate communication: "we'll paint this big mural about what it'll mean." It can still be a good thing because it gets community groups working with artists. It opens up the opportunity to interrogate things a bit more. I think certain artists are really well placed to do that and open "what-if" questions. That's where really exciting things can come.

But I think certain artists perhaps feel that they can do the nice bit, but the real niggly bit – the skills and just the emotional toll it takes to do that niggly bit – is beyond them. I'm not sure we are, as professionals on either side, managing that well for people and helping them do that.

Maeve Stone: What does the niggly bit look like to you?

Anne Kearns: The niggly bit looks like many things. It can be that the project doesn't look like what we said it was going to. How do we feel comfortable with that change? We still view it as a bad thing sometimes when a project deviates from the plan, but actually, deviating from the plan often means you were listening more. We still get so focused on the output from both sides that we can lose that potential to respond to what you're hearing from the community. That's the magic sauce. How did you get everyone to compromise? Feeling comfortable in discomfort is the thing artists can do a lot better than other people can.

Maeve Stone: What are the sources of inspiration in your work?

Anne Kearns: I take inspiration from communities. I really like Culture Connects as a community that has gone above and beyond. They understand that there are loads of levers of change. They're not going to be a group that responds to everything, but they can offer a variety of things that all work in a common direction. I think they've done that very well. Burrenbeo was doing that originally. I think projects that take that approach are really interesting. Corca Dhuibhne Inbhuanaithe (Dingle Peninsula 2030) is another group who do really nice work, again taking what you can take and working in a common direction. It doesn't have to be perfect. I think people who work with "Not Perfect" are my inspiration.

Maeve Stone: Are there approaches or tools that you see working well for groups who are attempting to find some kind of consensus, even if it's a consensus that shifts or changes over time?

Anne Kearns: I often refer to 'We Go Forth' and get advice from them on how to do that kind of consensus work, because I found them really positive in the beginning. One thing that's come up a lot in Ireland at the moment is we don't really have a structure for putting MOUs where the community are central and the expertise is coming from the third party. Those exist strongly in the UK, and we could be borrowing from them a lot more.

A tool I saw the other day that I really liked was from the Co-Production Collective from UCL. It is basically about how we get together on the same page... to have a shared goal and then keep our own independent goals. They have a really lovely table framework for how to work through that. It's when you're really getting into the nitty-gritty of long-term goals and shared goals, but I think you need a really good facilitator. It's not an easy or affordable find.

That's the magic sauce. How did you get everyone to compromise? Feeling comfortable in discomfort is the thing artists can do a lot better than other people can.

And then there's the power of going for a walk as opposed to a sit-down meeting. I am a firm believer in making the focal point something else if moments of tension arise. Go for a walk!

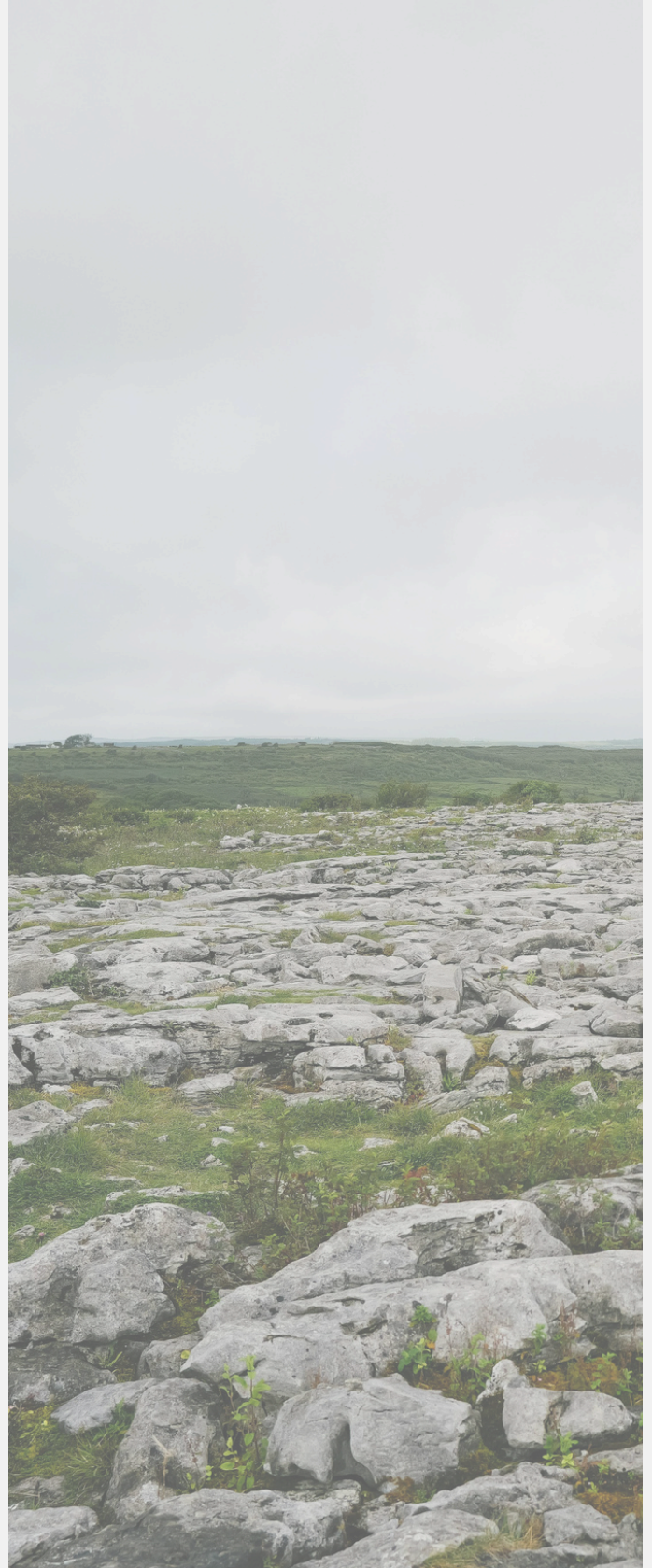
Maeve Stone: Where do you find language failing you most?

Anne Kearns: A shocking language failure I tell everyone is the provision for the Irish Sign Language community. They don't have sign language for all of the things we've just been talking about. There are words for climate change, but none of the nuanced language. I find that very upsetting every time I think about it. New-to-Irish communities face the same challenge.

The other place where language fails me is research where I actually need language that focuses on the differences to the daily lives of people. I don't just mean the difference of "it's going to be 2.5 degrees hotter," but what does that mean? What does it look like? What does it feel like? What is my day-to-day like? When you get people to do future visioning who haven't come from design systems, they often go into really apocalyptic images. They get into negative, tribal stuff, and you have to say, "That's not what it's going to be... what it's going to be is your sewage overflowing all the time'. I get concerned about moves toward future speculation because it's often done by people who are not futurists. They don't have that systems thinking to bring it back to the actual implication of now. It gets a bit too "everything's going to..." and that makes me anxious. It's a useful skill, but in terms of training, it's about bringing back in the hard systems or the futures thinking.

Maeve Stone: Are there any books or thinkers you would recommend to an artist who wants to know more about systems thinking?

Anne Kearns: There's an interesting researcher and writer called Runa Lazzarino. She writes about the disconnect between academia, community and praxis.



When you get people to do future visioning who haven't come from design systems, they often go into really apocalyptic images. They get into negative, tribal stuff, and you have to say, "That's not what it's going to be... it'll be your sewage overflowing all the time'.



VANYA LAMBRECHT WARD

TUNING IN

Maeve Stone: Tell me about your early relationship to Nature...

Vanya Lambrecht Ward: My grandfather would bring us camping. He was a Scout as a young boy, but then also as an adult he would run scouting trips. We lived quite far away from my grandparents so we didn't get included in that. But we did go on camping trips. As a city kid that was a big deal. Then there were a couple of other trips like that, where I went on holidays with a friend from school... Her Granny had a farm up in the north of Holland and they invited me, and I ended up spending the whole week there and met this cow. She was amazing. Just peaceful. She just had a number on her tag so I called her Clara. I would have been seven, maybe. She would leave all her friends behind and come running across the field to greet me every morning. So much joy!

And school - it was a Steiner school - that would have been very nature oriented. The style of teaching is all about spending as much time outside as possible and listening to the world around.

Maeve Stone: Do you have a sense of an interior relationship to nature at that time?

Vanya Lambrecht Ward: Yeah, there was another holiday where I thought; I want to be left alone, and I literally dug myself into a ditch for a week. I brought my doll and my notebook, and I just relaxed in this grassy ditch. It was a dry ditch and it was not that far from the house.

At the time I felt this is where I need to be. Just that day dreamy kind of feeling as well. You can let things just float.

They must have known where it was. I thought they didn't, but I just needed to get away from everybody. I spent days in the ditch just looking at flowers and escaping into this other world.

At the time I felt this is where I need to be. Just that kind of day dreamy kind of feeling as well. You can let things just float. I think it's also smells, like the warmth the sitting on the ground, the warmth of the soil and smells and the sun... And for me it seemed like this went on for months. I probably only spent a day or two out there... But then a few days in the life of a seven year old, it's like a lifetime! And in some ways it's a significant portion of your life and I still remember.

Maeve Stone: You've had a couple of different professional identities. But do you have a memory of when you were first drawn to thinking about nature as a primary inspiration?

Vanya Lambrecht Ward: I think where we live has a lot to do with that. We're so close to the woods now. Being in that kind of space... that still feels like 'the ditch', that kind of holding space. I suppose being on these daily or twice daily walks, most of the time with the dogs. It becomes harder and harder to separate yourself.

There's a festival called Pasar Malam in The Hague. It is a massive Indonesian festival, mostly food, and culture. I went there when I was about nine and there was a palm reader and he was just sitting in the corner. He pulled me out of the people walking around and he read my palm for free. He said 'You need to be beside the sea!'. Now I always hear the sea. It is important to me... to always go back to the anchor. With the dogs and knowing the woods so well, starting to know it in layers, beyond the superficial, beyond the seasons, getting deeper and deeper into a kind of acquaintance.

Maeve Stone: What does that deeper acquaintance look like? What does it feel like for you at a somatic level?

Vanya Lambrecht Ward: I would have always had garden, not in terms of, you know, a pretty garden, more wild, getting my hands inside the soil, which is why I'm back into poly tunnel with others. I really needed to get back into into my body in that way. And I suppose in terms of the walks it would be feeling the elements, you know, tuning. It's a tuning, and I feel that with mushroom foraging or any other kind of observation. I call it tuning because it's like a listening, but it's with your whole body, not just with your ears.

Maeve Stone: I'm curious about what you're describing is a really internal growth and shift in attention that changed your relationship to your surroundings in a very foundational way. Was there a moment that made you aware of your work in connecting with communities, more outwardly?

Vanya Lambrecht Ward: Yeah, when I was working with Leitrim County Council on a project - which initially started off looking at space - but it was to do with their siloed working environment. So I was reading a lot, and my practice would have been much more related to critical spatial theory and architecture, and that was the initial premise. At the time I was reading a lot on system theory, and I suppose then I had the real click moment. That's how it all began to be folded into my practice. It was a residency with an open studio in the public building so anybody could drop in, with a book alongside it, ideas that I had gathered from people that I interviewed. I still do those kind of studios and events because I think the conversation is as important, in facilitating connection, as the work.



It's a tuning, and I feel that with mushroom foraging or any kind of observation or like, I call it tuning because it's like a listening, but it's with your whole body, not just with your ears.

Maeve Stone: A lot of your work focuses on mycelium (that thrive on decay) and composting which is also a process founded in decomposition. How does grief settle in that space for you and how do you stay hopeful within it?

Vanya Lambrecht Ward: Grief and hope - Terribly intertwined - inseparable really. Knowing (and trying to live by) that everything is in constant flux, that one thing going... decaying... dying is another's life - for me this helps in feeling a lot of hope in grief. Ongoingness, fluidity, remaking are words I keep close to keep afloat and for the processes to unfold around me. Hope, optimism and humility come for me with mycology being a very new science and our knowledge around the ways and lives of fungi is an incredible way for us to do things differently, learn new approaches and it helps me think in new ways. Grief, death, loss and all that comes with that was a topic of conversation that kept arising, unintentionally at the open studio weeks I did as part of the LEER residency at the Sculpture Centre, the visitors and myself ended up talking about these points of discussion in all sorts of ways and for all sorts of reason, its intrinsically part of it.

Maeve Stone: The flip side of that is qualities of regeneration, of network building and connection that mycelia and soil offer. When you're beginning community engagement or collaborative projects with non-artists how do you establish the mechanisms for connection, contribution and consensus?

Vanya Lambrecht Ward: Yes, the regeneration is important, but perhaps I think of it more as processes of constant un-doing and ongoing. The network part in the soil but in everything really are a great way to link, connect and talk about entanglement when working with others.

Connection - Fungi being so omnipresent helps in talking about connection, everyone will have been in contact in some way even if they think they know nothing, all of us being (in a way) so new to the world of fungi is a great leveller!

Another mechanism I try to bring is the idea of the participation of the more than human actors in our day to day lives and their contributions and activities (rather than for instance their threat - although also acknowledging these). Talking whilst making or having items... objects... materials... mushrooms to hand is a great way to loosen ideas and get conversation and contribution flowing.

Consensus is always tricky. Thinking about feeling our way through things, always listening and staying aware helps me when working with others and those are attributes I might talk about in terms of wandering the woods or working with fungi in the studio.

Maeve Stone: And finally, who inspires you?

Vanya Lambrecht Ward: Giuliana Furci is phenomenal! Michael J. Hathaway and Anna Tsing I am a Laurie Anderson fan (although not a fandom kinda person...) for instance this series: Laurie Anderson presents, Spending the War Without You: Virtual Backgrounds. The River is the first in a series of six lectures, looking at the challenges we face as artists and citizens as we reinvent our culture with ambiguity and beauty. Ursula K le Guin (particularly her later essays) and my fellow Roots peeps (the Roots for the Future Collective).



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SINEAD CURRAN

FOLLOWING STONES

Maeve Stone: When you were a kid, was there a person or a place that initially activated your relationship to nature?

Sinead Curran: Yeah, growing up my uncle's farm, I suppose, was where we spent a lot of time outside of the home. I grew up in the countryside, as you know, down in Waterford, close to the sea, so spent a lot of time by the sea and in the woods. As a young kid, I think my earliest memories would be being outside a lot with my aunt and my uncle, and I just loved it. I used to stay up on the farm, and I would kind of be shipped sometimes between my various relatives, who all owned farms.

And with my grandmother as kids, we'd all meet up every Sunday and just go out and roll out in the hay and run around. She had a little stream running down through her garden. We would spend a lot of time down by the it was a lot of apple trees in the garden, so it was just this beautiful old, old garden, an old stream. I just loved walking in and around. It all felt so huge. I suppose now when you go back it's not, but it just felt so huge.

And I remember once we climbed over fences and we'd run into the fields and a bull came troubling after us. Every Sunday we would meet. all the cousins, all around the same age, and run around outside, total freedom and hens. She had hens all over her yard and the hay and the hay sheds and the trees, the apple trees and the stream. So they're my, earliest memories.

Maeve Stone: Do you remember the feeling of being there?

Sinead Curran: The feelings of community? I think all of us getting together again. My grandmother's place of everybody just connecting together in the landscape, in the outdoors.

It all felt so huge. I suppose now when you go back it's not, but it just felt so huge.

Maeve Stone: I'm going to jump forward to the earliest point at which nature started to appear in your creative work?

Sinead Curran: My father planted a forest. He bought a bit of land when I was probably late teens, and so we would have spent a lot of Saturdays in the cold, going out with flasks of tea and ham sandwiches, picking stones out there, because it was a bit of a trek to get out to it.

And so now there's a wood. There's a forest there. When I went to Art College I was fascinated by rocks, and I did a lot of photography. And I suppose I think that might have come back to the picking of the stones. I became fascinated by the surface of the moon, and I would do macro photography. I would zoom in on these rocks. It was more a way of looking deeper in, into the rocks, and trying to understand their geology.

Maeve Stone: And do you have a sense of where you started tuning into the climate emergency?

Sinead Curran: Yeah, I think it kind of started more when I did my masters, I spent more time with socially engaged practices, so I wasn't really thinking about the climate as such at that stage, but I was thinking of more communities like I was working with homeless community at the time, and more communities that needed care.

I spent a lot of time working in homeless shelters. And then I based my artwork for my masters around that, just to kind of explore working with community and socially engaged practice. So that was the entry point... and thinking about the care of humanity and what we had done to people who were homeless and why.

I've been in Dublin for quite a lot of time, and I was thinking: Is this my home now? I love going back down to Waterford. I never closed that that off as a place to maybe eventually end up, but I don't know. I was really questioning, What does home mean to me? What does home mean to people living in different communities? And then I suppose from there, then I started thinking about place. I'm here now, I'm just going to start getting to know people a bit more and starting to get to know people by getting involved with the community.

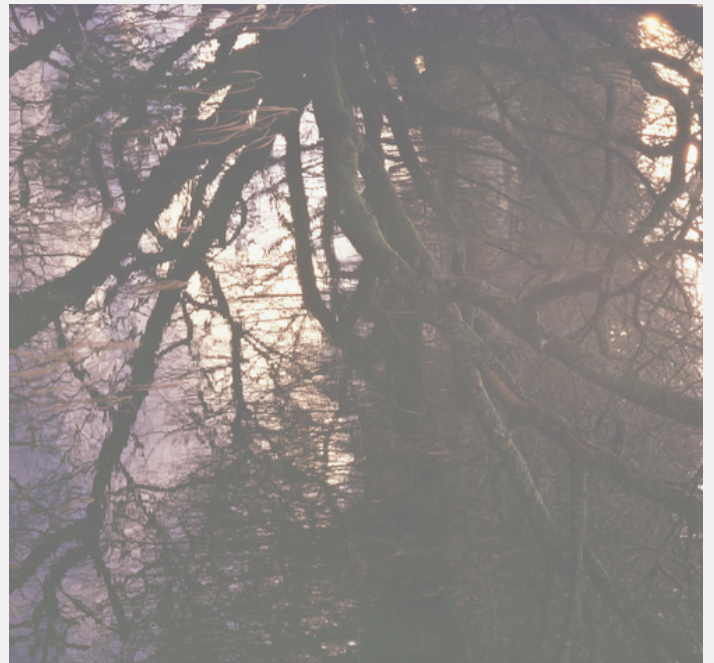
Getting involved with the community for me meant doing something around trees and planting trees. That started feeding into my practice. And so I did a project on my dad in 2019 - I went back to the woods. And that was kind of the beginnings of it; I started spending time in the woods that we had planted, connecting to that space as a starting point in my practice.

Maeve Stone: Are there any tools that you would like to share that help you navigate the overwhelm that can kick in if you're thinking a lot about climate breakdown?

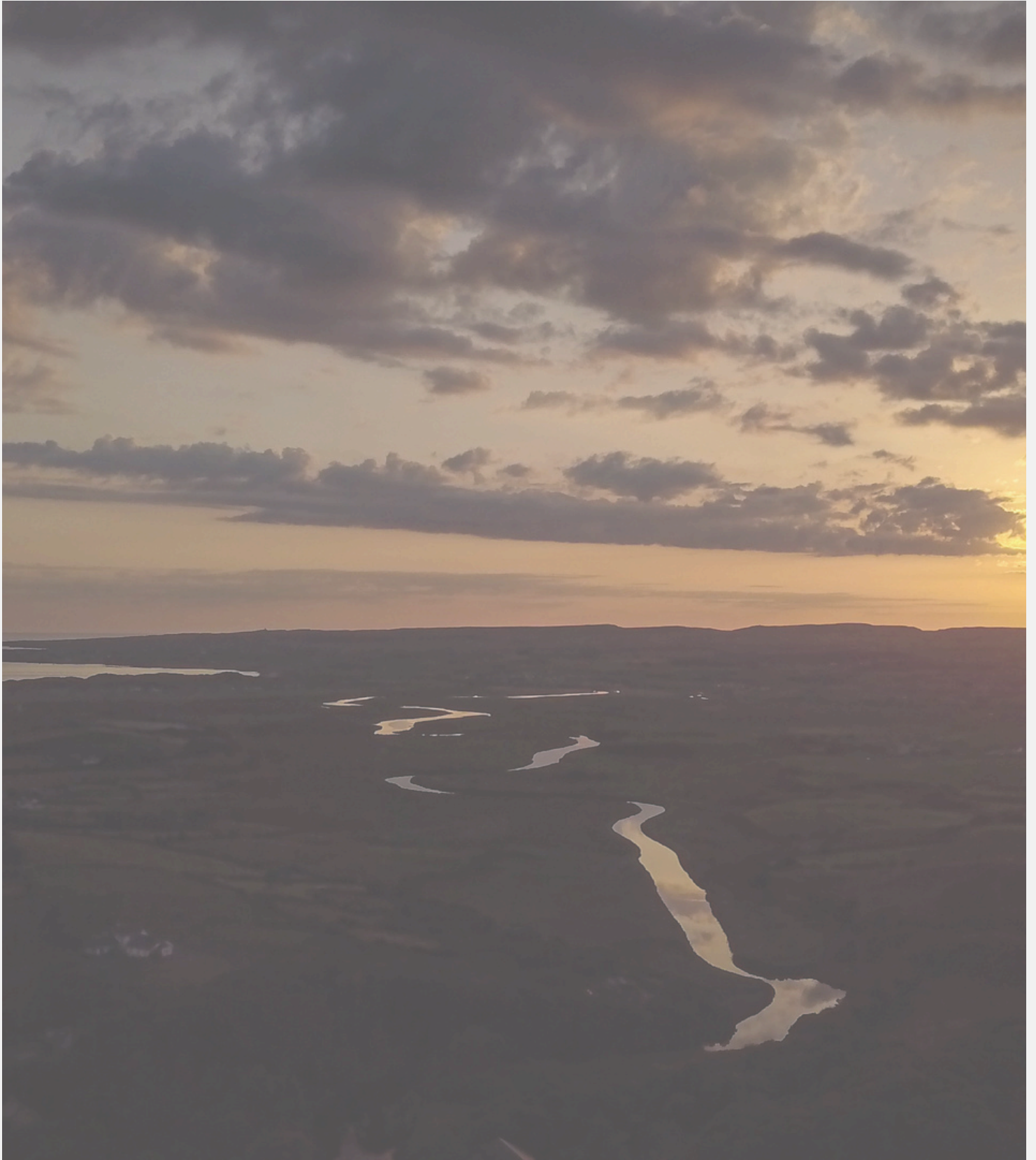
Sinead Curran: I think walking and listening, just going out for a walk in somewhere where it's a little bit quieter and I'm not hearing the murmuring of the traffic. So when I go down to Waterford the first thing I have to do is get out into nature... just walking by the sea. And then at the weekends, I tend to get out into the woods. So just kind of spending time outdoors. And I do a lot of yoga every day. That grounds me in my home when I can't get out. Just being present in the landscape and looking around and listening.

Maeve Stone: Who or what has inspired you most?

Sinead Curran: Robert MacFarlane's book *Underland* was one that really inspired me and I've read all his books since... There's too many others but this one really stands out.



*"We are often more tender to the dead than to the living, though it is the living who need our tenderness most." - Robert MacFarlane *The Underland**



“I think it is healing behavior, to look at something so broken and see the possibility and wholeness in it.”
-Adrienne Maree Brown



LISA FINGLETON

LOVE THE LAND

Maeve Stone: Where does your understanding of the role that artists can play in the climate emergency and the climate era come from?

Lisa Fingleton: To be honest, I think I have to credit Cathy Fitzgerald. I did the Haumea course and before that I really didn't see how the two things - art and ecology - could work together. I saw them as separate. I was trying to restore 20 acres of habitat and planting woodland. But I never really saw that mirrored in a professional practice in terms of community and all that type of work. So with Cathy... it was a light bulb moment. I was sitting in it going, oh my god, there are actually people who managed to do this as their art practice. And I was just blown away by it, and every single session, I was like, "Oh, that's what we do!" So I could suddenly see they didn't have to be separate.

Maeve Stone: How do you 'prepare the soil' for projects where you're inviting community into a creative approach to climate transformation?

Lisa Fingleton: Well, it's interesting because for most of my life I've had to go out from here (Barna) to do that work. The Creative Climate Action Fund gave me a chance to actually test out principles while I was doing it here at the farm.

The first ingredient is trust. It takes a while to build it and once you breach trust, you never get it back. So everything grows from that as a foundation. I've been with Rena 21 years here, working on the farm for 16 and people have been watching what we've been doing, so they trusted us. And they trusted us to also say, "we don't know about this, but we'll try this" and that was really important.

Next is the idea of being embedded in a place, and maybe even from a place - supporting artists who know the land and the people and are a part of it, maybe even for generations. I can't over-emphasise that enough. Our project has continued, even though the funding ended last October. Nobody notices the difference, because everyone's still doing it. They're all local and they're all still invested.

Another important ingredient is being able to pay for and value contributions. That really was a game changer. It allowed people to be validated in their experience. The community was acknowledged whether they came or not... they were paid. Even though they were only tiny amounts of money, people couldn't believe that they were being paid for their expertise as community.

The other thing that I really learned is acknowledging where people are at and what they can contribute. Because there's always expertise, and there's always knowledge in a group. If we hadn't opened it up, we would never have heard from Martha O'Connor from Poland. One day she said, "When I was a child we used to make up these theatre pieces". So I asked her "Do you think you could write a play about beans?" And she said, "I suppose so". And so she wrote the world premiere of the *Bean Chronicles*. If we got into that project saying, you have to write a play, she would never have done it.

And Sean Killhan. He has been keeping journals since he was 5 of birds in Ballybunion. He knows what birds were in Ballybunion for the last 50 years - and he's been taking records. He's the quietest man, he'd never been in a group before, but now there's 70 people in his Ballybunion Nature group. It's all because of his gentle energy and trust. He has no vested interest, except that he has absolutely loved the birds here for 50 years. Acknowledging what unique interest and energy people can bring is really, really important.

Also checking in with people each time you meet... and checking in with their hopes and expectations. That was probably the biggest strength of our project. We did it at the beginning and again in the middle of it, and people all said that was one of their favourite days, because they'd forgotten what they were there for. And also the freedom to participate or the freedom to withdraw is really important. It can be challenging in an art project when you've got 10 participants, we always take extra so that people don't feel under pressure.

And finally clear support and communication, within an interdisciplinary team. That was one of the things that was brilliant about Creative Island that I'd never been able to afford to do before. Working with a scientist, working with an ecologist, having that backup was amazing, and it meant that people didn't have to trust me on the ecology side of it, they could trust the climate specialist.

Maeve Stone: How did you build an idea of what the creative action would be in the project? Was finding consensus important?

Lisa Fingleton: We just kept expanding. We just kept doing everything. That was probably a problem, but it ended up being fun. So we didn't really have to agree on something. If someone wanted to do something, they were just like, go on, do it. I don't think there was any idea... 15:19:24 That wasn't followed up if the person had energy for it.

Maeve Stone: So giving people agency to be independent, to take those projects on themselves?

Lisa Fingleton: Yeah. For example one of the women has developed a community garden; one of the schools just took 50 trees off me to plant, and they've done their poly tunnel, they've done a whole biodiversity Garden. All we kept saying to people was if you need help, tell us, but otherwise, just go and do it. It was really fluid, and I think because Creative Island were so open with the funding they got 10 times more than they expected.

Maeve Stone: How do you balance the community engagement with your own creative investment?

Lisa Fingleton: I think it's really important in our artwork and in our expression as artists that for certain aspects of the work we're not relying on consensus from people. I knew there was contentious pieces I wanted to explore about carnivorous capitalism, about how capitalism and patriarchy works.

Sean Killhan had been keeping journals since he was 5 of birds in Ballybunion. He knows what birds were in Ballybunion for the last 50 years - and he's been taking records. He's the quietest man, he's never been in a group before. There is now 70 people in his Ballybunion Nature group.

I knew there was work around Palestine that not everybody might agree with. I knew there was work about rivers and farming and pollution of rivers that would divide people. I just felt like, I'm gonna do this. I'm not being the creative Ireland person, I'm not being the Ballybunion person, I'm just being me as an artist.

Maeve Stone: What helps to ground you in the work you do?

Lisa Fingleton: Other artists. Like when I heard your interview with Colm Toibin on the radio... I was so fed up and I just heard your voice, it was like a little angel coming out of the potting shed. I still have you goosebumps. When I heard you speak.. that's exactly what I needed to hear. So I suppose what grounds me is, um, other artists whom I respect and admire. I do exercise every morning. I'll walk the beach, or I'll swim in the pool. We eat pretty good food too, we grow our own organic food. I mean, that is really important. Hugely time-consuming, but worth it. I see all of these things, I don't know where I'd be without them.

Maeve Stone: Who inspires you?

Lisa Fingleton: Bernadette Kiley. I can't even imagine how you can stay painting climate change and flooding and war and all the different things that she does with such integrity for so long. I just find her amazing. And she's really funny and has a really good balanced view on life. Dr. Vandana Shiva in India has been a massive influence on my life. And then the Barbara Kingsolver book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*.

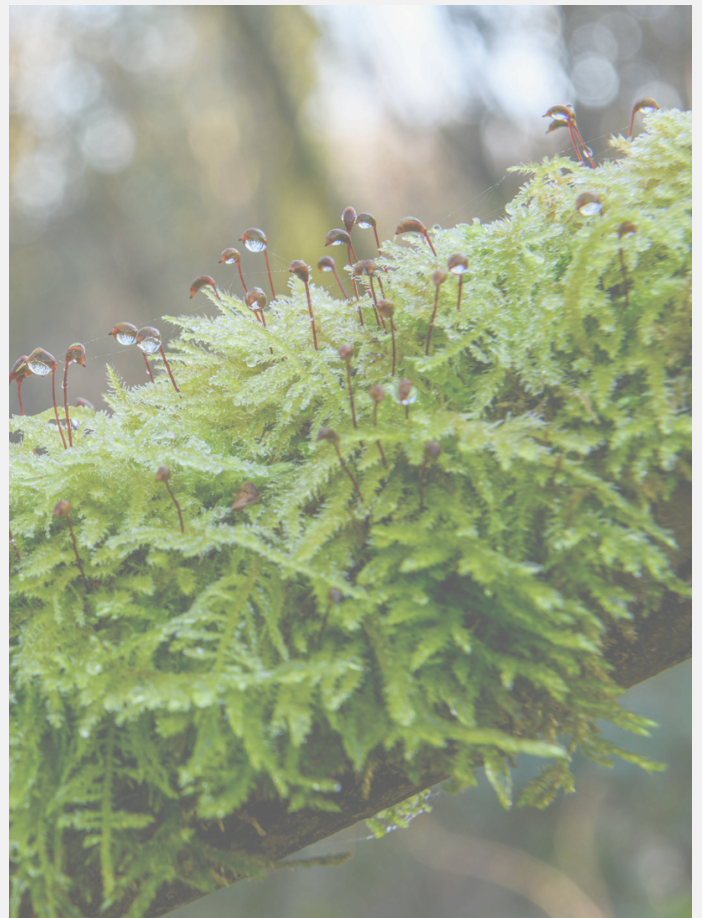
Maeve Stone: Is there anything you've learned from nature that you would like to offer to other artists?

Lisa Fingleton: Just that idea of leaving nature alone. I'm looking out here now at my little flower bed that's not a flower bed anymore because I just let it go. Just leaving things... Because things will grow perfectly well. There's loads of bindweed in the forest, but I noticed the briars are really taking over so the briars will keep that at bay. And hopefully the trees are tall enough now that they'll stay standing. Ecosystems regulate themselves.

Maeve Stone: What can Nature teach us about care?

Lisa Fingleton: I'm more comfortable with the word love... because for me care implies an imbalance in power. It implies one person caring for the other. For me, I actually can feel moments of love. I'm just looking at a flower, I'm looking at a bird, and I feel such love. I almost feel like I'm the mother of, or sister, or friend of millions of beings. On this 20 acres of land there are millions of life forms. Millions. There's the 10,000 trees, there's the 60,000 honeybees, but then all of the hidden creatures in the soil.

And I think that I have, without even knowing it, become a kind of guardian of it all. I'm so defensive of it and protective of it. I've been asked to do all these other art projects in different parts of the country and I don't want to leave here. I don't want to... I don't want to leave. I don't even want to leave for, like, a day or two, I just want to be here. My love for all the creatures is getting bigger and bigger and bigger all the time.





ABI IGHODARO

DEEP LISTENING

Maeve Stone: How did this whole journey with nature embedding in your art begin?

Abi Ighodaro: I feel like a few years ago, different people - including you - seeing me different really made a huge impact on my practice. I had never really seen how direct the link is. And this is a better space for me in terms of also meeting artists and people who are supportive and who get it.

I did an application for a bursary recently, and I sent it to an artist I've known for decades who isn't socially engaged or ecological. In the application I was talking about listening... they come back to me, and said, "You haven't said anything! What are you gonna do?..." and I replied 'Listening!'. I explained that I'm inspired by nature, it's listening, it's emergent. They just looked at me like I was crazy... It was also a really nice reminder that it's been a while since I've had to explain myself in those terms. This is what I was negotiating in the past. That's why things felt so hard, because actually a lot of people were like that, so these sort of ideas were not accepted.

Another huge moment was working with Dominic Campbell in the grief cafe - at the start he was like "This is listening and there's no point going in with what you want to do, because you don't know what's there. You don't know what's already emerging." So our task for 12 weeks with the Grief Cafe was to listen. To see what's emerging... listening until the listening finishes, rather than to when you feel you have to do something or say something. He was so dedicated to that and it was so inspiring. That was huge.

Maeve Stone: How does listening start for you?

Abi Ighodaro: The most important thing is let's just chat, let's just go for a coffee, because we're human beings. How do we feel together?

Maeve Stone: Have you seen these new approaches appearing your own creative practice?

Abi Ighodaro: Yes! in October, part of Black History Month I was working with food, collaborating with a theatre artist, Tanya Bridgeman at The Civic Theatre. I had an installation which was a table, two books, rice and beans... and interviews we'd had with people talking about their childhood food influences. Again, it was this whole idea of community, communal experience and just that feeling of connection and duration. We were talking about food, talking about rice, talking about beans... Loosening those soft boundaries... where does artwork sit? What is duration? Where do things connect? How can the audience be part or not part of it? ...That's how nature works things out. It isn't segmented or fragmented.

Maeve Stone: What would you like to see emerging in your work as an expression of your connection to nature?

Abi Ighodaro: I really want my work to be experienced like weather... an experience of the body. A direct bodily exchange, rather than an intellectual one where I'm giving you an experience, or telling you, or teaching you.

I'm also realising I don't need to have that carrot and stick sort of way of working with myself or analysing how things are going... focusing on one thing and not moving on until it's finished—that sort of punishment mindset. No. If I don't touch something for months, and then I do touch it, it's true. It's more in line with nature.

Maeve Stone: So less product driven more process driven?

Abi Ighodaro: The rushing through isn't about productivity, it's more about keeping you too tired to question or to notice, or to have space between things to then be like, actually, how is this the most efficient way to do something? And you've got this idea of competition among peers that is so nonsensical.

Survival of the fittest has to do with us against each other but that is the fastest route to extinction... it makes absolutely no sense.

Maeve Stone: How do you manage overwhelm?

Abi Ighodaro: One thing I'm building on, and I think it definitely started from the green circles, is an understanding that you don't have to solve everything. Part of our culture is trying to resolve things. The phrase 'I don't know' feels dangerous and feels indecisive. But actually, it's in making space for those things that new ideas comes up... sitting with what you're actually feeling without trying to turn it into something is so important. Don't try and talk yourself down too quickly, or don't try and find a solution too quickly, but just sitting with what you're feeling without trying to turn it into something, or... remove it. I've found that really fertile. Not only in terms of resilience, but also in terms of shaping different ways of seeing things.

And just understanding more about ecology, because the whole thing about nature is not that it's perfect, it's that it allows space for things to break down, you know? And so, it doesn't hinge on everything being perfect. And actually, part of that design where things break down is what makes it evolve. That's what makes possibility happen.

Maeve Stone: Who inspires you?

Abi Ighodaro: I'm inspired by an Afro-futurist - Adebayo - he talks a lot about cracks. How we don't know the answers, but rather than seeing it as a problem... it becomes a fact, which then allows the true system to emerge. Whereas when we try to drive things to solutions too quickly all we get is a variation of what we already know, and so it's still continuing the same cycle. So for me, it's just learning to sit with the grief or the despondency, or the overwhelm, and I feel over time it starts to tell you its own message.

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My sincere thanks to all of the people who made time to speak with me and contribute their voice to this collection of conversations. I hope you have found as much value in their insights as I have.

- Maeve Stone