Community and the Ecological Turn

What Does Art Have to Do with That?

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The link between humans and the environment is arguably one of the oldest, most important relationships humans have had throughout history. This link has undergone multiple changes. Nowadays, in postmodernity, the relationship we have with the environment is quite different from the one that existed in modern or ancient times. In recent decades, concern over the environment and the ecological crisis has become a crucial issue in contemporary society and culture. The growing exploitation of natural resources has severely damaged the planet, making us aware of the impact human beings have on the world.

As a reflection of society, art has also been influenced by this concern for the precarious global situation in which we find ourselves. The term ‘ecological turn’ can broadly be understood as a change of vision in artists when they address the relationship between human beings and the environment. This movement within the arts seeks to explore, question, and raise awareness about issues related to the planet and ecology, turning the aesthetic object into a space for reflection and action in the face of environmental problems.
PAMELA ORTIZ (PO):
What would your definition of “ecological turn” be and how would you say it is relevant today?

NICOLA COLCLOUGH (NC): I think it’s something that I’ve become aware of in the last one or two years so it’s quite recent. I was researching, prior to this interview, to remind myself of certain things and I read this really interesting article that was talking about the roots of the ecological turn being in like the 60s and the 70s, when people were making land art, making work kind of with the environment, with nature, and also there was a feminist trend to this, so I think at one point, it was not very well regarded but it is now, in retrospect (fig. 2).

PO: Like Ana Mendieta?

NC: ¡Sí! I think that is the exact example. The piece was the field in the middle of Manhattan. Exactly, that is what I read about in the article. So, I guess what is interesting is that over the past few years, there have been changes at two levels. So I think the first level is the art that is being presented to the public. But I also think that there has been a lot more talk within cultural institutions about what they need to be doing, you know, not just like presenting an exhibition that is about climate change but actually what are they doing as an organization to have less of an impact on the planet. So when I worked at the Manchester Art Gallery, I was curating an arts and health program and we would talk, as a production team, about things like if artworks should be shipped across the world for a particular exhibition when, I can’t remember the exact statistic, but it’s like maybe, 80% of the world’s art is in storage. So, Manchester Art Gallery has a big storage space at the site and off site as well, so we have all these pieces of art that we’re not sharing but we are shipping art

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Figure 1
(article cover, p 308).
Portrait of Nicola Colclough

Figure 2
(previous page)
Forest bathing workshop hosted for “We Are at The Library”
from across the world to be in a particular exhibition. So, there are questions about how art moves and how we can be better maintain the building and the infrastructure around what's happening. I also read some interesting stuff about Frieze, which is the biggest art fair in... well, they have them all over the world but in London, they basically built like a town a day, for five days. But you know, the kind of energy and everything that goes into that. So, I think Frieze have been really evaluating how they operate as well in terms of shipping and different things like that. There's two sides to it but I think the pandemic has also pushed this agenda forward and I don't know if it was the same here, but in the UK, there was real return to people understanding what the natural world could do for them because I think previously people might've spend their weekends in a shopping centre or the pub or in an art gallery. All these places were closed, so people would go into parkland spaces.

PO: The thing here in Mexico is that parks are beautiful, but they are closed at certain times because they become dangerous. So, I think here, during the pandemic, it was just like "stay at home". Because, in my opinion, the government did not do such a good job during the pandemic. I think here the government didn't do much for people to get out and enjoy themselves in nature. Many parks were actually closed because of the pandemic. I tried to go to some national parks during the pandemic and they were closed because of Covid.

NC: There were definitely criticisms about the way the government handled the pandemic, but they were mainly leveled at the fact that the government felt like they were above everybody else. So, they imposed rules on other people and those rules were quite difficult to follow in terms of people being separated from their loved ones and people in old people's homes. The family couldn't go and visit them, and people died alone. People were giving birth alone because their partners couldn't be there with them, you know. All these things that would actually affect people
for a very long time and then, meanwhile, the government were having parties. And the health secretary was filmed basically having a relationship with somebody in his office. So, it is very interesting that the rules are that you have to stay at home, you are allowed to go shopping and you are allowed to go exercise once a day, but you are not allowed to travel to exercise. What is interesting is that the UK has a national health system, so it's in the government's interest to keep the population healthy because if they aren't healthy, then it is going to cost more. So, yes, that's what people did and naturally, people started to explore their local green spaces; green spaces had never been so busy. They did feel quite safe, and they felt safer because there were more people using them. So, I did a project in between lockdowns with The Turnpike Gallery where I was walking with people to look at different ways that people see place. So, it was about place making. And in that local community, there had been a murder in the canal, it was drug-related. This young man, maybe in his early 30s, had lost his life so there was a temporary memorial there. I mean, I would say that this is fairly unusual in the UK. You can't really own guns so, to me as somebody who lives in England, it's shocking when I see a gun because you normally don't see them but there is some gang-related violence linked to crime, which I think there is in every country. So, I was really interested to do this walk but members of the public discussed how safe we feel in these spaces and the thought was that we should be using our natural spaces for recreation, because the more people use them, the safer they become. And you know, taking ownership of the space. And some parks do close at night in England. But yes, you wouldn't usually find security at parks and stuff like that.

**PO:** Yes, here it is very common to go to parks but in the morning. Nobody goes to parks at night unless they are doing something fishy. I don't know if it has to do with the pandemic, but I think the government implemented extra security in these spaces. So, I think these are little steps towards feeling safer in some way. But, as a society, I think
that we need to give a different perspective to these places so they can be seen purely as places of recreation.

**NC:** And in terms of coming back to the ecological turn, people were talking about this phenomenon in all kinds of places so like, *Vogue* magazine, for instance, had an article about how parks had become the new trendy place to be, which I thought was really interesting. And I think that we're still riding on that wave because usually in the UK, exhibitions are planned quite far in advance, so I think this time was the genesis of a lot of exhibitions that we are seeing now. So that is why this summer we had a whole plethora of exhibitions that are linked to nature, activism, and the different ways people related to nature at the time. My concern about this is that it's a trend.

**PO:** That's what my next question is about.

**Do you see the ecological turn being incorporated into the everyday lives of human beings rather than evolving into another fancy term for expensive fine art galleries?**

**NC:** I mean, I do think that people are becoming more conscious consumers, so I think that people are thinking a lot more about what they consume and how they consume it. Changes in people's diets, more people are becoming vegan, vegetarian or kind of consciously choosing to eat less meat or dairy because of the environment. And I've kind of seen that happening in the UK for the last five years or so and that doesn't seem to be changing; people don't seem to be doing that because of [a trend]. I think when people flip that switch, they stick with it. A lot more people are thinking about that. There is a big trend at the moment about secondhand clothes in the UK, so a lot more people try to avoid fast fashion. So, I think all of those things are
interesting and I think the arts can kind of influence culture a little bit but it’s like the arts are obsessed with what’s new and of course I’m curious about “What’s going to be the next thing after this?” So, hopefully, these ideas will stick around but obviously they are not going to. People aren’t going to do exhibitions or project after project around the same subject, so it’s like looking into new ways of talking about a topic to keep people interested.

**PO:** And I think, yes, it is a trend right now and it will evolve to be a fancy term in art history. But, I think it doesn’t matter because at least, because it was a trend, it changed people’s lives in some way.

![Image](image-url)

**Figure 3**
Nature healing ritual performed in Mexico City
Figure 4
Nature healing ritual
performed in Mexico City
NC: That’s true. I guess the other thing is that it’s also coinciding with the rise of socially-engaged art practices. So social practice is becoming much more popular and like I mentioned, in the lecture before, the funding streams for art in the UK are very much bringing people towards making participatory art and it seems like this is a subject that a lot of people can relate to, so a lot of people are incorporating it into their practice. Because it is something that works to bring people together and can potentially make a difference in strengthening human and more than human relationships.

PO: How do you think that the ecological turn can form and transform a community?

NC: I think because of climate change, the environment is a thing that affects all of us, I think it’s something we can all relate to. And I think that most people now want to make some change. What the arts can do is bring people together and perhaps point to some ways to take action. I think sometimes it can be quite hard… you kind of want to make a change but you don’t know how you can do that, so the arts can provide places where you can actively get together with other people and then you can do something. So, I’m quite interested in how art exists in the real world and how… I guess there are two things, like how art can become useful but how everyday acts can become art and kind of play with those things. So, I guess there’s the idea of nature bringing about a sense of wellbeing and how you can tune people into that so that they might think differently about how they behave towards the environment. But yes, when I work with communities, it’s often the reason that somebody might leave the house to come to a workshop, then they meet other people, and they do an activity and that changes their perspective and then maybe they go on to talk about that with a family member or a friend, so that spreads ideas. And at the end of the workshop today, I talked about how I see

Figure 5
(Previous page)
Forest bathing
my role as an artist as being a catalyst so I share ideas with people and then people can find their personal connection to nature. For some people it will be the science, for other people it will be the beauty and the aesthetics, for others it might be food and growing and for other people it might be more mythology or herbalism. So I think that people can come to workshops, find something that they really relate to, something that sparks their interest and then they go on their own journey to change (figs. 3 and 4).

PO:
What have been your main struggles in these workshops, if any?

NC: Probably the main thing is that people still relate nature to being hippie-ish, tree-huggers and all those kinds of things. And I think there is not much respect, or a fear of ‘hippies’ because they are seen as people that reject a lot of the ideas that society has about what success is, and this comes back to economics as well, because society tells us that success is having a big house, having a big car, having lots of things but actually success is saving the environment. So hippies are often seen as a subculture and I think sometimes people don’t see themselves as being eco-warriors or things like that, so it can be hard for them to get in touch with that side of themselves. I worked previously on a council housing estate, and I was working with the residents to explore their doorstep green spaces. I was told that sometimes there is a tension between the people who manage this space and the people who live there. I designed a workshop to bring them together. One of the people from the management organization turned up and he’d been told, I think, that he needed to come to this workshop, and he said to me: “I’ll tell you now, I’m not going to be sitting down or lying down on the grass”, so before it even started, he was kind of reluctant. I think there is a barrier sometimes to how they perceive people that enjoy time with nature, and they don’t kind of see themselves in that way. But in general, people are open (fig. 5).

Society tells us that success is having a big house, having a big car, having lots of things but actually success is saving the environment
**PO:**
Where have you been doing these workshops outside the UK?

**NC:** Up to now, I think only in the UK because I haven’t really traveled due to Covid. But I’ve been doing these workshops in different spaces, public parks, the university where I work, and in art galleries that have gardens.

**PO:**
Did you see any difference between how the workshop was done here and how it is done in the UK?

**NC:** Not really. Usually I try to keep the groups quite small because I think that people get a better experience and are more willing to try new things. Today it was a bigger group than usual and hard to get everybody in silence. But also, all of the workshops that I’ve done in the UK, people come because they are actually interested in the idea and I understand that today, in a formal education environment, some people were more interested than others. But the responses felt quite similar to the workshops at home.

**PO:** I think it would be really interesting if you had the chance to do this workshop in different parts of the world and see how different communities relate to their environment because we all have different perspectives towards nature, and it depends on culture.

**NC:** I think the key thing for me is that the benefits to the people that are involved are quite obvious so when I create workshops, I often focus on the well-being elements of the activity.
PO: Finally, can you tell me about the materials that you use for your art and why they are important?

NC: I don’t make a lot of things. I’m not much of a things person, I’m more of an experience person. And I think that translates into my art. I tend to make experiences more than I make things and I think the things that I do make are quite light, like when I first started making art, I would use found or recycled materials. Over time, I kind of just got a bit annoyed because I make all these things and they might get exhibited once and then they would just sit in storage, but they didn’t really make change. Sometimes I make films and audio recordings that are quite light in a physical way. But then, other things that I make, for example, hand creams from medicinal plants are things that we can use in a massage, so it’s making artworks that have a use. In the exhibition that I’m making here, in Mexico City, with artist Perla Ramos, most materials have been found, such as old ceramic piping, and after the exhibition, the materials will be re-used or recycled. And there are a couple of reasons why that is happening. I mean, one is that I’m on the other side of the world from where I usually am, so all of my materials and things that I might use are quite far away and I can’t take anything with me either —but also because we are documenting the process of walking and exploring the botanic history of the city. So we found some things on the walks and then the space where the exhibition will be held is an exchange. We are hosting in the house of a friend who is living rent-free but in return spends time caring for the house.

PO: Climate change is not a problem of nature but I believe it’s more of a political problem, a problem with the system, so it is an issue with power, violence, and greed. Everything that the system has and is ends with nature. We have to take that into consideration and the fact that climate change must be addressed as a political matter rather than a ‘thing’ that is just happening, because it is not.
Would you consider the ecological turn as a form of political art, and if so, how would you distinguish it from “normal” or “conventional” political art?

NC: Of course, climate change and how we mitigate it is a political issue and one that is heavily linked to economics. Green solutions often cost more and too many of our systems are designed around profit, rather than caring for people and planet. Yeah! I would definitely say that art making on the subject of ecology is political because it’s drawing attention to areas that politicians or people in power don’t want us to see, you know. They want us to be in a state where we feel that we’re powerless to change things because we are one individual and climate change is overwhelming but I think that the arts can be a place where people can actively make change. And I think that the next step is for artists to not only make work about the environment, but also art that offers solutions.

PO: The thing is, there is a big political and economic agenda behind all this so sometimes it feels impossible to get from point A to point B when the obstacles around point B are big corporations.

NC: Yes. There was this community campaign in the UK. There is a crisp manufacturer who makes crisps and people started to ask: “Why aren’t these crisps packages recyclable? You could implement that change”. Thousands of packages of crisps, probably millions are eaten every day. We are creating this rubbish. But as a consumer, if you want to eat crisps, you are going to buy them in this package but, you know, the company could change the way that they manufacture them. And they said, “Yeah, we will change them, but we’ve given ourselves twenty years to make this change”. So people started to post the crisp packages back as a form of protest. And the mail companies couldn’t cope,
they were asking, “Please stop sending these crisps packages because they don’t go through that system and they are breaking it”, but to me, that is a work of art. That kind of grassroots activity… you know, I read about this in the newspapers, so it is obviously getting a lot of attention.

PO: I think that is a different type of protest. We normally think of protest as strikes and overthrowing the government but it can really be something we do in our everyday lives.

NC: Yes, exactly.

Po: How do you acknowledge or how do you think we, as a community, as a society, can acknowledge the scale of the crisis without succumbing to despair?

NC: What kind of got me really interested in working in this topic is that I was working with a wildlife trust in the UK whose job it is to look after different spaces and protect them for future generations and I was asked, as an artist, to work with young people to make a piece of art, so together, we decided to make a film. I asked the young people to make something every week, an artistic response that would go into a collaborative film. It was really interesting because people did activities to explore the environment and then discussed the responses. We quite quickly started talking about environmental messaging being condescending so, we got to a point where we asked “Yeah, we know about climate change but what can we actually do?” Or it becomes really hard to think about without feeling depressed or anxious so we started to think about different kinds of messaging and a more reciprocal relationship that wasn’t just about “what can nature do for us?” but also “what can we do for nature?” And this is where I started to research about forest bathing and research has shown that having a deeper connection with nature encourages more pro-nature behaviors.
with nature encourages more pro-nature behaviors. I guess I hold on to the idea that individuals working together can make change and try to find space for healing in my work. I guess it’s just kind of keeping on going without despairing but I kind of personally ride the wave. Sometimes I’m really up and energetic about things and sometimes it really gets you down but I kind of feel like you, although I do think it’s important to recognize that life has a full spectrum of emotions and we can embrace them. Sometimes anger or fear are great motivators for change (fig. 6).

PAMELA ORTIZ

An art historian, Pamela has focused on issues related to power, politics, sociology, and their close relationship with art, considering the influence and power art has on the development of a society and vice versa.

NICOLA COLCLOUGH

A Manchester-based artist working with self-directed projects and commissions to explore how art can address social issues with a focus on care, wellbeing, and the environment. Nicola uses artistic thinking and processes to open up collaborative dialogues. Central to her practice is the idea of place, encompassing the social, physical, and emotional landscapes we inhabit. In 2021, she trained as a Shinrin-Yoku (forest bathing) leader and has since incorporated these techniques and ideas into her arts practice. Nicola also leads the “Approaches to Engagement” module in the Socially Engaged Arts Practice M.A. at the University of Salford.