

Sustainability, Imagination and Aesthetics:

An Interdisciplinary Workshop

26-27 June 2024

Report by Carl Thompson

Held over a day and half (afternoon of June 26th, all day on June 27th), this workshop on Sustainability, Imagination and Aesthetics (SIA) was a hybrid event, conducted both in person and through Microsoft Teams. Around 25 people congregated on site at Surrey's Stag Hill campus on the first day and around 35 on the second, full day, with another 5-10 people joining virtually in most sessions. We heard 19 papers or presentations across the workshop as a whole, delivered by 21 speakers (several talks were delivered by two people). These speakers joined us from all around the world; while there was inevitably a preponderance of UK-based academics, arts practitioners and activists on the programme, there were also presenters and attendees hailing from Germany, Finland, New Zealand, Australia, Canada and Luxembourg. We also welcomed speakers at every stage of their academic careers, from an emerita professor to PGR students, and even one MA student.

Workshop Aims

The workshop's overarching intellectual aim was to explore how art, design, and the category of the 'aesthetic' more broadly might best contribute to the project of achieving a sustainable society. Alongside this scholarly enquiry, there was also a secondary aim of establishing connections, and beginning to build a wider network, among academics, arts practitioners and environmental activists who share an interest in questions of art and sustainability. This was important because the workshop represented the first academic undertaking of the newly formed Sustainability, Creativity and Communication (SusCC) research group within Surrey's equally new Institute for Sustainability. For Loukianov and Thompson, the SusCC programme leads coordinating the workshop, this research agenda represents a departure from previous projects (though in each case it grows naturally out of earlier undertakings). One function of the workshop was therefore to make contact with relevant stakeholders at a local, national and international level, so as to publicise the SusCC group and establish the foundations for future collaborations and joint funding bids.

Partly as a result of the networking aim, our programme was deliberately eclectic and wide-ranging, embracing academics and critics, arts practitioners across various media and art-forms, and environmental activists. Yet this eclecticism also reflects the conceptual and scholarly underpinnings of the event: SusCC group members share a pluralistic and inclusive approach to, and understanding of, the role the arts and the aesthetic might play in promoting sustainability. We also hold a similar broad, inclusive understanding of what is meant by 'sustainability', in line with the UN's designation of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

It is also reflective of the existing scholarship sitting at the intersection of these two areas, which stems from a broad range of disconnected disciplines and streams of work. As a consequence, there is no one way in which the arts can or should speak to the sustainability theme, and no single methodology, theoretical framework or set of evaluative criteria by which we can either promote or assess the efficacy of the arts in this regard. Our workshop accordingly sought to approach its topic from multiple angles, combining academic reflections and practitioner/activist showcases, and accepting both theoretical or scholarly analyses and more embodied, practice-led contributions. Additionally, it sought to create an opportunity to connect various scholars and research areas.

Workshop Themes

Keynotes

We invited four keynote speakers (with two of them delivering a joint paper). These were

- Professor Sacha Kagan (University of Hildesheim and Leuphana University, Germany)
- Dr Sanna Lehtinen (Aalto University and University of Helsinki, Finland)

And speaking jointly:

- Dr Chloe Germaine (Manchester Metropolitan University)
- Dr Paul Wake (Manchester Metropolitan University)

Sacha and Sanna's papers opened the workshop, forming our first session; Chloe and Paul's paper was part of the Session 7 panel and closed the event.

Sessions

The papers and presentations delivered across the 7 sessions addressed the workshop's core themes and concerns from a variety of angles. We began with two keynote talks offering theoretical perspectives on art and aesthetics in the context of sustainability. Sacha articulated an understanding of art (in all its different forms and media) as potentially a site or activity which requires audiences and participants to inhabit 'radical complexity', i.e. a state of ambiguity and inherent uncertainty which can work powerfully to undermine the more rigid binaries that modern Western society often imposes on its citizens and their apprehension of the wider world. Sanna then unpacked the topic of 'aesthetic choice', offering a model of the multiple factors that influence our aesthetic tastes but then also stressing that there is, importantly, often a cognitive component to aesthetic preferences. From this it follows that tastes can change – and be changed – through better knowledge of factors such as, for example, the wider environmental implications of any given artwork. She then used a Finnish case study to suggest that tastes are changing to embrace sustainability and environmental responsibility as a criterion the public bring to bear on their aesthetic values.

The second session of the first day was loosely themed around the topic of 'place-making', and more specifically the role (and responsibilities) of the arts in fostering better, more sustainable relationships between individuals or communities and their localities. This was also a panel delivered entirely by PGRs currently studying for PhDs, which is a good indicator of the newly developing themes in the intersection of arts and sustainability research. James Jones of

the University of Waterloo, Canada gave an overview of using Participatory Narrative Investigation techniques to involve local communities more intimately and collaboratively in environmental projects. The theme of narrative was then picked up again by Jon Mason from the University of Brighton, who explored oral story-telling as a means of re-enchanting local (and especially urban) landscapes for their inhabitants. Finally Chris Medland – currently a PhD student at the University of Surrey but also a practising architect – gave a salutary talk addressing some of the problems potentially attendant on ‘aesthetic’ and ‘imaginative’ responses to (or renderings of) the idea of sustainability. More specifically, Chris targeted the tendency of some recent architects – and also of some literary and artistic genres such as solarpunk – to foster imaginings and expectations around architectural design that superficially look like they are ecologically responsible but are in fact environmentally problematic and highly wasteful of resources. The danger here, he pointed out, lies not just in the carbon expenditure of individual projects themselves, but also in the way they collectively contribute to a dangerously misleading visual lexicon for what sustainable buildings, and a sustainable future more generally, should look like.

The first session of our second day was loosely themed around the theme of pedagogy, and the role the arts can play in educative programmes seeking to foster environmental values. Firstly, Mary Ann Kernan of City University, London, spoke on the ways she has woven environmentally-focused art practices and methodologies into a Masters degree she has designed at City’s Business School. In Mary Ann’s experience, such exercises and activities not only stimulate creativity and creative thinking (both around environmental issues and in life/work generally), they also foster more embodied, participative forms of learning, and crucially for the sustainability theme, they can help foster hope and resilience, a sense that we still have the agency to change things and make a difference. This in turn helps students move beyond climate ‘overwhelm’ and anxiety, and beyond cynicism and despair, to start making small, practical changes to their lives and their societies. From Mary Ann’s focus on mature, graduate students, Tiziana Tamborrini from the non-profit GAIALUX foundation in Luxembourg turned to a consideration of the usefulness of art in fostering ecological sensibilities in children. Drawing on a public art project GAIALUX has recently run in collaboration with local schools and also Luxembourg organisations like Eurostat, Tiziana like Mary Ann stressed how the creativity inherent in many art practices can help foster positivity and a sense of agency, thereby countering climate despair and depression. This session then finished with two short 10-presentations from current PGRs. Megan Cumming spoke about the research she is currently involved in at Swansea University which is exploring the environmental affordances of ‘flow’ experiences: i.e. those moments when we seem to lose ourselves in some pleasurable or contemplative activity, so that we almost seem to transcend time and space. Then Rebecca Edgerley introduced her current post/project at Exeter University. Part of an NERC-funded Biodiversity project, this involves Rebecca setting up a Creative Club for her colleagues, and thereby introducing a variety of creative methods and perspectives to currently active researchers across multiple disciplines, including the natural and social sciences.

Sessions 4 and 5 of the workshop were showcase sessions, in which practitioners talked through the art forms and strategies they used to engage with environmental issues, and recounted case studies of specific projects. The first presentation was from Hannah Woodliffe and Tilly Maginnis of H and T Creative, who discussed their use of dance and choreography as a medium for promoting sustainability. More specifically they discussed the research and production processes underpinning their recent dance performance *No Time to Waste*, and the various outreach activities they have undertaken since devising and launching the piece.

Drawing on discussions with the International Marine Litter Research Unit at the University of Plymouth, and partly funded by Greenpeace, *No Time To Waste* addresses the problems of plastic pollution in the marine environment, and Hannah and Tilly spoke powerfully about how ‘art can touch people’s hearts and change attitudes through an emotional and visceral experience’.



Next up, Alex Holland (editor of the online magazine *SolarPunk Stories*) gave the group an introduction to the fiction and graphic design work that comprises the emergent genre of ‘solarpunk’. SolarPunk is an offshoot of steampunk and cyberpunk, but it adopts a more affirmative, less cynical attitude than its predecessors, and in particular aims to inspire people with positive visions of what Alex termed ‘a deliciously sustainable world’. Also underpinning the movement is recognition that apocalyptic warnings about the looming threat of climate change are on their own potentially counter-productive, producing despair and nihilism rather than a constructive appetite and energy for change. After outlining the emergence of the genre, Alex then adumbrated the various strands and subgenres of solarpunk – for example, ‘metropolitan’, ‘cottage’ and ‘rooted’ solarpunk – and outlined his magazine’s plans to take the genre/subculture to wider audiences. The final showcase then came from Trish Kiy, representing the Dorking, Reigate and Redhill branch of the activist group Extinction Rebellion (XR). Trish gave an overview of XR, before moving on to discuss the role of posters, placards and other forms of artwork in XR’s activism; in keeping with several SIA speakers’ emphasis on hands-on or embodied forms of knowledge, this session culminated with participants being encouraged to produce their own environmentally themed wood-block prints.

Our penultimate session began with Mark Sim of Schumacher College returning to the theme of place-making and emphasising again (like Jim and Jon in Session 2) the importance of narrative and storytelling in connecting people and communities to their localities and encouraging ecological responsibility. Stories, he emphasised, can play a vital role in countering the ‘dematerialization’ of space that is so common in modernity. Then Dimitris Asimakoulas of the University of Surrey discussed how a recent Greek-language graphic novel adaptation of Aristophanes’s play *The Birds* heightens the original text’s ecological message and brings it to a

new audience; he additionally demonstrated the exercises he uses with translation students to further draw out and underscore the play/graphic novel's critique of eco-hubris. Finally John Charles Ryan (Southern Cross University, Australia) and Francis Joy (University of Lapland, Finland) introduced the concept of 'forest sentience'. This is the scientifically grounded understanding that plants have a more sensory existence than people realise, experiencing and responding to a variety of sensations and even, in some contexts, possessing a form of memory that stores and shares strategies for survival. Building on this knowledge, and drawing also on the anthropologist Tim Ingold's recent theorisation of the imagination as a mode of responsive attentiveness, John and Francis have run a series of artistic projects in Finland designed to increase awareness of this active dynamism in the vegetative world; and the larger aim here is to promote a greater respect and reverence for plants that can be harnessed to the larger campaign to counter the current biodiversity crisis around the world.

In our final session, Kethaki Wijesinghe, a Masters student at the University of Brighton, discussed her project of utilising and adapting traditional theatrical masks in Sri Lanka to promote greater ecological awareness in that country. The faith in supernatural beings that originally underwrote these masks and associated performances is on the wane, yet they remain a popular art form. Kethaki has designed a range of ecologically themed masks and is developing a performance script and exhibition that seeks to reinvigorate this traditional medium so that it speaks to modern environmental concerns (see pic. below).



In our penultimate talk, artist and academic Raewyn Martyn (based at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand but speaking to us via Teams from California) gave an overview of her work using biopolymer paints and materials. This is a medium chosen for its inherent instability and the way it changes over time and with changes in temperature; as harnessed by Raewyn, it encourages reflection on the long-term or 'fourth dimensional' attributes and affordances of the materials we use, and also on the lasting effects of chemical pollution. In particular, Raewyn examined how the aesthetics created through the use of biopolymers can intervene in conventional methods and provoke different imaginaries and different material relationships that contribute to critical considerations of contemporary economic and biosystems and support transition beyond those. Finally, our two last keynote speakers, Chloe Germaine and Paul Wake (both of Manchester Metropolitan University) introduced the concept of game 'hacking'. This is the creative subversion and adaptation of the rules and gameplay of

commercial board games, which is undertaken on the one hand so as to expose the ideological assumptions and messages underpinning the game in its original, 'authorised' form, and on the other hand so as to promote a more environmentally responsible ethos. Also important here, they suggested, was the sense of creative agency often instilled in participants by game hacking: i.e. the sense that rules and systems are not necessarily fixed and absolute, they can be reworked and improved.

This emphasis on encouraging a sense of agency emerged as a key theme across our two days of discussions. As many speakers demonstrated, art is often a participative, creative practice that enables individuals and communities to feel that they are at least making something – and by making something, participants feel they are making some small difference, some contribution to combating our current environmental crisis. Escaping a sense of hopelessness and fatalistic passivity was then often a vital first step towards engaging in more substantive ways with the wider social and political challenges presented by climate change and similar threats. In that sense, art was conceived of as 'performative' rather than solely 'representative' of transitions to more sustainable lives. Other themes to emerge in our discussions was the great variety of ways in which art forms of all types could be harnessed to promote sustainability, the usefulness of art as a means of reaching wider audiences, and the capacity of art to generate emotional impacts and more embodied forms of cognition. At the same time, however, we also returned on several occasions to the potential dangers and pitfalls of using art, imagination and aesthetic. Art and the imagination can be vital springboards to helping us visualise (and so eventually achieve) alternative, better futures; at the same time, they also sometimes offer illusory or falsified visions, that potentially obscure important realities. Critical reflection and debate, in events such as this workshop, is accordingly an important activity if we are to harness most effectively the undoubted power of the arts, imagination and the aesthetic.

Outcomes and Next Steps

We are currently drawing up a proposal for Special Issue which we intend to offer to the online journal *Contemporary Aesthetics*: this will be based around 8 or 9 of the papers/presentations offered at SIA.

The event was also a means of introducing both the Institute of Advanced Studies and the Institute for Sustainability to a wider audience beyond the University of Surrey. Several attendees expressed an interest in exploring the IAS's Fellowship opportunities in future years, and are also eager to establish better connections with the Institute for Sustainability. Contact details for all participants have been added to the SusCC mailing lists, and we will be circulating shortly workshop slides and recordings of the presentation to all SIA attendees.

Important lessons were also learned about the challenges of holding a hybrid event combining in-person and virtual participation. This was a new format for both the organisers, and on the first afternoon there were some minor problems and delays integrating virtual side of things; by the second, full day these had been cleared up and everything proceeded much more smoothly. Hybrid delivery was however a definite advantage of this workshop as it enabled participation from across the world with minimal environmental impact, and we plan on taking learnings from this workshop on board to continue improving hybrid workshop delivery in the future.

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