

Bringing the arts into socio-ecological research: An analysis of the barriers and opportunities to collaboration across the divide

Freelance artist 2 Interview

Current projects include a self-initiated (arts council funded) project - arts catalyst co-inquiry with an anthropologist.

Climate resilience research funded through xxx university - co-inquiry led. This project came out of working with academics on a past project with a social scientist.

The interviewee has therefore worked with a number of different science disciplines; engineers, social scientists, anthropologists.

There is a thread that connects all 3 current projects

Much led by the interviewee being a part of a team in the initial instance and having conversations, a conversation, with someone doing their PhD on co-inquiry

The 1st project in the thread was in a brownfield - came from an invitation to be an artist in a social science project.

The next, the interviewee led and worked their way into an engineering department, as the interviewee wanted to hang out with engineers. The interviewee approached the department, and they said yes – but unpaid (the interviewee kept another job in photography in order to do this – the art that the interviewee really wanted to do!)

They had the perception that the interviewee would illustrate all their amazing work. However, the interviewee doesn't work in this way (the interviewee's not an illustrator) so the interviewee had to find ways to shift their perceptions of what art is or what art can be. The interviewee did manage to create a perception shift with them, they understood better the scope of art through her time there. The interviewee said the interviewee was trying to push boundaries within the department whilst there, what could the interviewee disrupt / create / change.

This wasn't an equal project. It was the interviewee's own inquiry project; the interviewee was in observing and learning and developing ideas around how the interviewee could work with them and water systems. In a way, this was a mini, self-directed residency. The interviewee shadowed, imagined, learnt and feedback.

The interviewee did some art interventions in the faculty

Not part of a collective project but as an independent artist – in residence – in the engineering faculty. Self initiated.

The interviewee and her way of working was never written into any engineering research bids

Arts catalyst – facilitate arts and science projects and have a long history of this way of working and brokering connections

After long a standing embeddedness within sciences/engineering and working amongst, and collaborating with, academics from different disciplines: social science, engineering, anthropology, water systems, the interviewee feels the interviewee now needs time to reflect.

Probably needs some kind of break from working with academics – it's hard work having to translate / think what their language is and sometimes work is almost expected that isn't paid for or the impact on the artist properly thought through. The language and co-production can be challenging. It was especially so during Covid, for example, having to work to rigid time frames dictated by the funding; shifting goal posts yet still 'forced' to deliver, meetings on zoom with no space for socializing / important space for dialogue and idea sharing as a team. The interviewee really valued this kind of time during the No-Picnic project, as understanding, trust and ideas were developed during such times.

The interviewee likes working with people with specific knowledge sets from different disciplines.

It's about people and personalities. Some people you can easily work with. Not forced, no restrictions.

But this can create clashes or conflict

Need to find a way through

Ebb and flow

The artist has more freedom with this, as they can dive in and re-imagine; they can push and pull. This can give the academic permission to integrate what the artist is doing or has done into their research.

A curator in the mix can interrupt the flow of an arts /science collaboration as the curator will try to make sense of it and reframe it in an arts context for an arts world and art audience. They will be looking at PR and promotion and audience numbers and arts Kudos – they sit outside of the relationship being formed and developing by the artist and the scientist. Sometimes the arts organisation needs to be dumped.

Holding space, reflexive approaches – this way of working is common in theatre where everyone has to work together, in one space for one goal

In theatre, they have a dramaturge [this is not the correct word] – someone who comes in and has a look and feeds back. Someone on the outside observing and offering productive feedback – a facilitator for the relationship between artist and scientist.

As an independent artist, you are alone. You have no line manager, no team, and no one to go to. It's a vulnerable place to be. Scientists often have a department and other scientists they're working with to bounce ideas and issues around with. They might not always realise that the artist is working alone and feels more weight on them due to this.

How the artist and the academic write is very different. The artist is writing without constraints. The academic has a framework: abstract, methodology, experiments, discussion.

Having someone who can match people is helpful, someone saying: I think you two should meet. I think you'll get on

Getting on is important

You do your little bit
I'll do my little bit
Then we'll do stuff together
Then we'll make a cake and eat and chill out and just chat
Then one will push for something that the other may never have done, for example,
a policy document that brings together data, aesthetic, things discovered through
the co-enquiry. Or a book instead of a paper

It's about relationships. How you get on with someone.
What makes a working relationship successful and beautiful is not having to speak,
but knowing what the other is doing: both coming from the same place, both
passionate about the same subject, both understanding each other's methodologies.
Trust.

There are many, many, different types of artist
And many, many different types of scientist
Its not about science and art
This term is problematic
It's about what artist, what art
What scientist, what science
What research
What material
What process
What aesthetic
What reflection process
Ultimately pushing boundaries

The artist and the academic sit in different worlds.
[Different worlds with different structures, strictures, rules, procedures, networks,
peer reviewing, and accolades]

Publication of interest: No-picnic
This gave the scientists licence/permission to be free in their writing. Some found
this an emotional experience.