

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

Academic artist 2 Interview transcript

The interviewee has gone to scientists for elements of their projects
All their projects are driven by the interviewee. Self-initiated.

The art is coming first

Science plays a fundamental role – their work has scientific underpinning

Scientists are also important - specialist knowledge and the bouncing of ideas

There is a need for that (scientific) information and dialogue in order for the interviewee to navigate the development of her work

Current research: xxx project, wetlands and peat bogs

The interviewee discovered that the scientists the interviewee was working alongside were so focused in on their research that they didn't seem to look at the wider landscape; the bigger picture. They have data that they don't always join together. Being an artist in the mix allowed for a joining up of data and landscape this came with a realisation from the scientists that this is really useful – they have asked for more.

An observation: older researchers seem to have preconceived and fixed ideas of what the artist can do and offer them, for example, posters that will illustrate their work and research.

A response like this requires an open and honest conversations about what art can be and what arts research is. In such conversations, it became apparent that the scientists appreciated the open dialogue.

The interviewee was clear and firm that illustrations / dissemination materials were not their way of working and that the interviewee would gain nothing from doing that.

The interviewee has a “privileged” position as a researcher at xxx University: their art practice is part of their daily paid job. The interviewee doesn't need funding to do their artwork and the interviewee doesn't need to chase commissions.

Occasionally the interviewee's partners will find small pots of money to help deliver specific art outcomes.

The interviewee has found that there is often a willingness from the scientific community to work with someone from outside of their discipline – that's a massive hurdle overcome.

Sometimes the interviewee gets scientific equipment and goes out and collects data themselves, but there are specialists doing this work, so wouldn't it make sense to work with them. The interviewee's started realising this more recently. This led to the interviewee contacting people and asking them to share their data.

This first approach can be difficult if it's at the start of a project when the artist doesn't fully know what they want or what they will be doing. This can cause suspicion – why do they want my data? What will they do with it? The interviewee has had this experience when trying to connect to a scientist the interviewee hadn't previously known, they were non-committal about giving any details of the data. Usually, the interviewee would invite the potential collaborator for a coffee to chat face to face, however with Covid the interviewee wasn't able to do this – which may have meant suspicions were more easily formed. The scientist had been recommended / referred to her.

Being an academic opens doors as academic institutions encourage working with other universities.

Contentious land can create additional complexities and brings in the political, for example, land where the HS2 is planned to run, which can form difficulties in collaborations with different perspectives.

The dialogue between artist and artists is different to artists and scientists. We need to learn how to speak about our art and practice in new ways, as the scientists won't necessarily understand arts-speak.

The interviewee likes getting different perspectives on landscapes and landscape use.

The interviewee sometimes knows what type of scientist they want to work with, sometimes not. Outside of the field, we don't necessarily know whom we should be talking to. Sometimes talking to one scientist will result in being referred to another, whose research is more appropriate.

Often contacts are through previous contacts, but this approach requires keeping in touch. The interviewee makes the effort to stay connected.

The interviewee doesn't cold call.

The initial network is essential and being part of an institution really helps as the interviewee can tap into that existing network that the interviewee is part of. The personal relationships are hugely valuable and the interviewee acknowledges that as a privilege.

This privilege means the interviewee can stay focused on the interviewee's artwork and does not need to apply for call outs.

The interviewee has long-running projects. If an idea excites the interviewee, the interviewee will pursue it.

There is never enough money for art. The down side of this is that artists will make things happen. This means that they will, and do, work for free or barely anything. This is problematic

An important part of the interviewee's practice is cross-disciplinary dialogue

For 19 years the interviewee worked at xxx university as a print technician. All the time the interviewee was dedicated to the development of the interviewee's art practice and research. Working in a university meant the interviewee was connected to people in senior positions, who supported the interviewee and mentored the interviewee – the interviewee was writing papers and researching through the interviewee's print making with another colleague, neither of whom were officially academics at that point. The interviewee was privileged to have access to a university network within and beyond the arts faculty. When working as a technician, when approaching academics from other disciplines, the interviewee never told people the interviewee was a technician, the interviewee merely mentioned the interviewee worked at university. The interviewee acknowledges this is partly because the interviewee knew it would help the interviewee not to say the interviewee was a technician.

An important part of the interviewee's practice is cross-disciplinary dialogue and has been for years.

There is a difference between art in academia and art within the context of the art world. It is rare to find authentic practicing artists who have academic positions and careers. They may not have the time or capacity to dedicate to their practice, so the practice slides. The interviewee knows many academics in art, who are not practicing at all and haven't for decades.

Acknowledged that their university is quite unique insomuch as it has academic staff who are peer-reviewed and accomplished within the art world and the interviewee feels their teaching and research is better as a result of this.