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# THE HOPE OF SOMETHING DIFFERENT
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**Salo islands (Jackie Brookner)**

In discussions between artists whose work is focused by environment and ecology, there is a general recognition of a commonality with artists who engage in social and community practices. The work often operates in both realms, sometimes seamlessly. Both are interested in different forms of relationality, particularly in sharing and negotiating authorship with communities and creating stories that serve interests beyond their own.

The words 'collaboration' and 'participation' come up regularly in the statements of both social /community and environmental/ecological artists. The obituary of eminent ecoartist Jackie Brookner serves to highlight multi-dimensional collaboration and participation:

> Among her recent major projects were *Veden Taika* (*The Magic of Water*), consisting of three man-made floating islands in Salo, Finland: *Veden Taika* was a collaboration with local volunteers, regional science experts, the students and faculty of the Salo Polytechnic Institute, the Salo Parks Department and Office of Environmental Protection, Biomatrix Water and the coordination of Finnish artist Tuula Nikulainen (Malen and Schor, 2015)

This short statement, very characteristic of ecoartists, highlights first working with local volunteers, second with scientists, third learners and then institutions. Last but not least, it acknowledges the Finnish coordinating artist with whom Jackie, as a US based artist working in Finland, worked.

Theorists such as Grant Kester, Nicolas Bourriaud, Claire Bishop and Shannon Jackson have written about practices focusing on dialogue, collaboration and the politics of social and community practices. They have in various ways helped us to see

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that an aesthetics of process is the essential focus of artists working with diverse inhabitants and communities. But this isn't an 'aesthetics of facilitation', about 'performing workshops'. Rather it is a deeper interrogation of who has voice, authorship and agency.



**Students building the island structures, volunteers helping with planting (Jackie Brookner)**

If the big shift, as Grant Kester currently argues, is towards co-production as a knowledge-based practice, then artists (and probably designers too) who focus on relationships share common cause. Kester says:

> I do think there is a paradigm shift occurring, specifically in the way in which we understand aesthetic autonomy. This isn't simply a shift in the content of work, but in the underlying formal organization of artistic production. [...] These changes aren't occurring simply because artists are asking different questions about their own creative practice. Rather, they reflect a broader, trans-disciplinary interest in collective knowledge production (Kester 2013)

It's worth bearing in mind that while the art world believes the 'axis of negotiation' is between the intrinsic and the instrumental (art for art's sake versus art that is useful), those involved in co-production in the social realm understand the axis to be between the instrumental and the political (is co-production useful to deliver services or is it empowering users and communities to determine what services are useful). It could be argued that both social and environmental/ecological art practices are more interested in the latter axis than the former, not because the quality of art is not important, but because its aesthetic concerns lie in the relations rather than in isolation. Moreover, the sharing of authorship, the process of co-production, is the locus of aesthetic experience.

> Is co-production useful to deliver services or is it empowering users and communities to decide what services are useful?

Kester talks about 'trans-disciplinarity', and this territory is rife with language of multi-, cross-, inter-, trans-, extra- and post-disciplinarity. All of these formations attempt to nuance an understanding of different configurations of expertise working together to understand and operate in the world. In fact, the *disciplinary* aspect of this language is sometimes the most problematic, when we recognise that every living thing knows stuff and uses that knowledge to seek its own well-being.

If some dimensions of social and community practice are rights-oriented, this is true for some ecoarts practices too. One of the most fundamental rights is to have your understanding of the world recognised and valued.



**Bingham, Collins, Goto and Stephen. Nine Mile Run: Community Dialogues, 1997-2000**

Tim Collins, writing about four years of team work on *Nine Mile Run*, a major brownfield site in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, highlights the role of the work in relation to inhabitants:

> The project team intent was to transcend the role of primary authorship, instead initiating a citizen discourse, and a creative engagement in the definition, form and function of post-industrial public space. […] The dialogue was intended to complicate the discourse of development, and create a space which would nurture creative citizen voices (Collins 2001).

If social and community practices are concerned with human relations, then it might also be useful to pick up on Tim Collins' articulation of environmental and ecological practices. Tim distinguishes between the meanings of these words.

- **Environment** is the relation between the being and its surroundings and therefore speaks to 'place'.

- **Ecology** is the study of the systems of relations between living things and their contexts. It places less emphasis on the human at the centre of everything, and more on the connectedness of everything.

Ecological art is sometimes 'useful' and sometimes 'political', sometimes drawing attention to other ways of experiencing and understanding the world and our place in it, and sometimes involved in restoration of ecological systems. What might distinguish it are questions about who the aesthetic is for: Ecoartists imagine that the aesthetic could be for all the living things involved in the work, not just for humans.



Jackie Brookner's obituary goes on to say:

> Emblematic of her work, the islands provide nesting habitat for birds and plant based filtration for improving water quality in the Salo Bird Pools, lagoons that were formerly used in the sewage treatment processes of the Salo Municipal Sewage Treatment Facility. Because an abundance of migrating and nesting birds now use the lagoons, the pools have been established as a EU-directive conservation site.

Are humans the only living things that appreciate the aesthetic of the work? Can we imagine that the migrating species, who obviously know huge areas of landscape, now know and know how to use this changed part of their landscape? Does the fact that it is healthier make it a more significant part of their landscape? Is that a form of beauty? Do they have a Right to this?

Kester has recently suggested that art 'offer[ing] the hope of something different from "the world as it is," is valued above all else,' (Kester 2015). A concern for relations, the connectedness of things, is not exclusive to the arts. As Kester argues, this change is a wider paradigm shift across many aspects of society.

The question is whether the art can be taken up by people and used for their own well-being.

The distinctive contribution of both community and ecological arts practices is in the sharing of authorship and the recognition of the authorship in others. (This is a particular challenge within the arts, where sole authorship has been a defining characteristic mirrored in a society driven by individualism.) Ultimately the question is whether the work (the art) can be taken up by inhabitants (or visitors) and used for their own eco-cultural well-being.

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http://arestlessart.com

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## WEBSITES

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Chris Fremantle is a producer and researcher working across healthcare, energy and ecology. He is particularly interested how people, particularly with different knowledge and expertise work together for eco-cultural well-being.

He was formerly Director of the Scottish Sculpture Workshop where a key theme of his programme was collaborative and interdisciplinary, including in particular *Place of Origin*, a 10 year landscape as art project resulting in a new public space and viewpoint on the rim of Kemnay Quarry. He has been associated with On The Edge Research, Gray's School of Art, focus on art in public life, since its inception in 2001, and has contributed to key projects including *The Artist as Leader*.

He worked with Helen Mayer Harrison, Newton Harrison and David Haley on *Greenhouse Britain: Losing Ground, Gaining Wisdom*, a project addressing adaptation to sea level rise. He led the development and implementation of the art and design strategy for the New South Glasgow Hospitals, bringing the whole landscape of Scotland into one building. He is currently working with the Land Art Generator Initiative on the possibility of 'beautiful renewables' for a site in Glasgow, addressing questions of social and environmental justice through public art.