

CreaTures: Creative Practices for Transformational Futures

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Keywords

transformative practices, experiential learning, socially-engaged art, Horizon2020, futures

Context

CreaTures – Creative Practices for Transformational Futures - is an EU Horizon2020 funded research project investigating the potential of creative practices in art, design, and related cultural fields to support positive eco-social change. Running from January 2020 to December 2022, the interdisciplinary collaboration involved eleven partners across seven countries, including four Universities (Sussex, Aalto, Utrecht and RMIT Europe), artistic and design studios (Superflux, Hellon), arts collectives (Furtherfield, Kersnikova) and creative arts cooperative ZEMOS98. Two non-for-profit organisations with special domain knowledge: Sniffer (<https://www.sniffer.org.uk/>) (UK) and OKFI (<https://www.okf.fi/>) (FI), further complemented the expertise within the collaboration.

The initiative, which grew in part from pilot research undertaken by Professor Ann Light at University of Sussex and Ruth Wolstenholme of Sniffer, has a long history based on good trust relations. Throughout her career, Ann Light had been interested in how transformative artistic practice and experiential learning can transform people's orientation towards certain issues or indeed 'futures' - of how the world could be. In 2013, she met Ruth Wolstenholme, Sniffer's managing director, at an AHRC sustainability workshop. A team was assembled and an initial funding bid was unsuccessful, showing, perhaps, the little interest at that time in how artists could contribute to sustainability-oriented culture change. A few years later a Horizon2020 funding call was launched, looking at how arts can deal with societal challenges - and a grant was awarded to investigate transformative practice and experiential learning to support positive social and environmental change for artists and public participants. The project aimed to give agency to both the public and artists in imagining different futures: an

alternative approach to more mainstream attempts at instructing behaviour change in relation to the climate crisis.

Process and Outputs

CreaTures was structured around three work processes; The Observatory (<https://creatures-eu.org/observatory/>), for identifying and mapping existing, fragmented and often hidden transformational creative practices; The Laboratory (<https://creatures-eu.org/laboratory/>), for supporting new experimentation and direct collaboration with diverse stakeholders, by mounting several different scales and types of creative arts production, and Evaluation (<https://creatures-eu.org/evaluation/>), testing new and existing creative practices for their impact in a systematic way. These components are interwoven with a series of engagement events (<https://creatures-eu.org/engagement/>) enabling broad access to the evolving outcomes of the project for different groups, including policy actors, scientific community, and members of the public.

Across these processes five work packages operated and WP2, led by Professor Light, was responsible for the observatory - for organising and standardising research across different experimental productions and ensuring the projects involved are representative of what is happening across the sector. WP3 was the core engine room of the project, dealing with the Experimental Productions accounts and management. WP4 managed evaluation and policy relations, whilst WP5 was concerned with engagement. Although the project started out as interested in the relationship between the practitioners and 'audiences', as the project evolved and in part due to the pandemic, a shift towards exploring practitioner relationships of all kinds developed. This reflects the learning that the idea of 'audiences' is not fully relevant to socially-engaged art, which often involves volunteers and public-practitioners. The question of how to understand and describe engagement and influence in this type of artistic practice has emerged as a key theme for the researchers involved. Even the language for the nuances of these relationships is lacking.

Experiential learning, reflection and evaluation is looped throughout the whole project, which is centered on twenty different experimental artistic productions, known as ExPs. The artists involved in the collaboration have continued with their normal practice, but working in relation to the

CreaTures researchers, leading to more explicit reflection in the artists' work on the relationship between their practice and the social or cultural change they are intending to effect.

Sentience Dial.

*Image © Ruth Catlow and
Cade Diehm*



Policy engagement has also been central to the collaboration. Recognising that creative practice has a lot to offer, but is not yet enshrined in sustainability policy or even cultural policy, the project took a collaborative approach by bringing policy-makers together in reflexive fora. These discursive interactions led to a deeper understanding of what creative practice can do to offer people a vision of alternative futures, what those futures might be like, and how this practice differs from other kinds of narrative that traditionally impact upon sustainability policy-making. This has led to a widening understanding of creative practice as an agent of change, potentially for entire communities, and CreaTures has sought to make that more visible in the policy world.

Different research roles within the collaboration were split between the different work packages, which did, at times, create arbitrary divisions. Furthermore, any project taking place across several countries, with meetings

also affected by the pandemic, would suffer from fragmentation, but the CreaTures research fellows worked very closely together to bring coherence to the project. This has been particularly necessary in the last stages of the project as all the insights from different strands have had to be brought together in a final framework.

The Open Creative Practice Framework (OCPF) delivered at the end of the project offers a strategic research agenda for key stakeholders, a set of strategies addressing the cultures and conditions for delivering more sustainable futures, and policy recommendations to focus and optimise work in mobilizing participatory arts for transformation. The OCPF explains the role of these practices in impacting cultures, offering related evaluation structures and case studies, in a form to enable people to discover what they might find useful.

What has become apparent is the role of affective change in the work of CreaTures partners; shifting cultural values beyond the immediate and consumerist, and giving individuals and communities a sense of purpose and connection to sustainable futures. This affective work hinges upon engaging participants in carefully-tailored experiences, then reflection on these experiences to make them memorable. Examples of how some of the ExPs have created opportunities for people to experience themselves in completely different ways include:

- Invocation for Hope - a vast, immersive installation that examines the complex interconnected relationships throughout the natural world, and raises the possibility of a more-than-human future – a post-anthropocentric planet in which humanity is just one part of a dynamic and multifaceted ecosystem. Audiences are invited to travel through a grid of burnt and blackened pines, salvaged from a recent wildfire, towards a resurgent living forest at its centre, where multiple species living in harmony with humanity offer a promise of a new way of living.
- The Treaty of Finsbury Park, an ambitious multi-year project by Furtherfield to promote biodiversity by reimagining the role of urban humans in greater collaboration with all the species of the London-based Finsbury Park. It features Live Action Role Play (LARP)* games where participants join Interspecies Assemblies to play as the species of Finsbury Park and to explore new ways of building empathy pathways to non-human lifeforms through play.

- Sustainable Futures Game that connects sustainability goals and everyday business contexts to help build organisations' capacities for imagining alternative futures.

*Interspecies Assembly of
Finsbury Park, 2022*

Image © Hydar Dewachi



Evaluation and Impact

The project has been developing evaluation theory and principles to assess transformational creative practice. Six principles and nine fields of change were developed by project partners in Utrecht University from the ExPs collaborations. What emerged from this work was an appreciation of evaluation as a creative act in itself. To appreciate the potential in creative practice, evaluation needs to accept experimentation, both as a process and as a goal, and to consider what creating alternative worlds and working along affective lines can contribute.

As the project began in January 2020, it had to rapidly transform to deal with the outbreak of the covid pandemic. Aside from creating challenges in

working practices for the researchers involved, the pandemic also divorced the artistic collaborators from their audiences - all in-person socially-engaged art practice was closed down. The project had a big emphasis on place-based work: how the context of a place can link local goals with bigger societal goals. But for two years the practitioners could no longer work 'in place'. As such, the project witnessed how artistic transformation can take place rapidly, finding different mediums and loci in which to operate.

From the perspective of the HE partners, working in an entangled way with arts practice required a very creative and flexible approach – the project found it needed exceptional researchers who could understand how art practitioners have to work across many different projects in varying roles simultaneously. The researchers too found themselves working across the multiple roles of creator, analyst and project manager, just to name a few.



*Interspecies Assembly of
Finsbury Park, 2022*

Image © Hydar Dewachi

On a more personal level, the collaborative project represents part of Ann Light's life mission, who started her working life as a drama teacher and witnessed the potential of arts practice to open up alternative worlds for people. The central theme of her research in the following decades has revolved around the question of what the future would look like if we understand how to 'dwell together well'. CreaTures has supported and evaluated

many different experimental arts projects that enable public participants to find their agency to make change, and participate in better futures. Due to a recent series of planetary crises, questions of agency in making change have unfortunately become more urgent for both research funding and policy making. By supporting this new need for change, not just the desire for it, and by investigating how people can fulfil their potential to co-exist in this shared planet, CreaTures is helping to open up alternatives and helping communities to find spaces in which to choose and manifest these futures.

Additional Information

For more information on the partners involved, please see [Our Team – CreaTures : https://creatures-eu.org/about/our-team/](https://creatures-eu.org/about/our-team/)

To find out more about all the Experimental Productions connected to CreaTures, please see: [Experimental Productions – CreaTures : https://creatures-eu.org/productions/](https://creatures-eu.org/productions/)