

Planning for Environmental Change and Learning from Engaged Creative Practice

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Our intervention in this interface piece critically reflects on learning from a collaborative project which involves artists and the use of participatory creative practices for environmental engagement. The project explores some of the ways in which arts-based thinking and practice can intervene productively to support transformative action and environmental planning at the local level. We also reflect more generally here upon the social and political roles that arts-based methods and creative practices might perform and, in particular, how they can encourage and enable engagement, collaboration, and learning around environmental challenges: processes that are all central to successful planning.

For us, creative practice involves imagining, making, and telling as a set of interrelated practices. Creativity is not simply the preserve of artists but is a standpoint and way of knowing-being and engaging that is playful, communicative and intrinsically open. Our work as academic geographers concerned with involving publics more closely with environmental decision making related to flooding and coastal change starts from the following premise: that imaginative ways of thinking, communicating, and working are also required to better engage publics and manage entangled and far-reaching environmental problems. For instance, creative practice can encourage conversation around issues that might otherwise be difficult to articulate (Kester 2004) and provide a voice for human and non-human others in discussions and debates (Revill 2021).

An ongoing research art-engagement project [Sounding Coastal Change](#) focuses on environmental and social change on the North Norfolk Coast. The project encompasses conversations, creative outputs and public and policy engagements. It has centrally involved the co-creation of 'sonic postcards' designed to 'presence' – or

actively bring into being - issues of concern around coastal environmental change in ways intended to galvanise conversation and inform local planning. The North Norfolk coast is composed of low-lying sandy cliffs, dunes, mudflats, creeks, fresh and saltwater marshes. It is an area of distinctive high value landscape, home to important breeding sites for birds and other wildlife. The North Norfolk Coast was designated an area of outstanding natural beauty (ANOB) in 1968. At over 90Km in length, this is amongst the longest single stretches of protected coastline in Europe. With the National Trust, RSPB and Norfolk Wildlife Trust all managing multiple sections. It is subject to regular inundation from storms resulting in a vulnerable changing and increasingly volatile coastline and habitats. The consequences of human induced climate change are evident in increases in the incidence and power of storm events, rising average temperatures and rising sea levels.

The project focuses on sound and the starting point for working with sound is based on the following qualities of sound and sonic art (Revill 2018):

- Music and Sound is associated with intensely personal and immersive experiences.
- Music and Sound shape the experience of place, landscape and environment through its effects on perceived atmosphere and the evocation of memories.
- Sound provides senses of fading distance and intimate closeness, which help orientate us and animate environmental experiences and effects operating at different scales and which trace out complex interconnections both proximate and across distance.

- Music and sound art operate through and evoke complex temporalities enabling us to express intensities, durations, thresholds, rhythms and polyrhythms of interconnected social and environmental processes.
- Music and sound art can give voice without resorting to language. So, music and sound can express environmental processes, non-human communication and human language within the shared space of the sonic work.

The short sound works ‘sonic postcards’ made by the project are co-produced pieces made by publics, researchers and sound artists working together in ways which creatively assemble and voice otherwise ‘unheard’ human and non-human voices. The project works with sound, music and different kinds of listening to explore the ways in which the North Norfolk coast is changing and how people’s lives are changing with it. Most importantly, the project uses these to explore some possibilities for an expanded politics in relation to environmental decision-making and the imagining of environmental futures (Revill 2021). All sonic postcards respond to a local issue of concern mooted in conversations with project partners. These issues are then collaboratively explored with publics and practitioners through a process of collating interviews and sound recordings and creating storyboards. The postcards are then realised by a sound artist through a series of iterations of the work each based on collaborative discussion.

One work explores the idea of ‘living sand dunes’ as a nature-based solution to coastal defence - a highly controversial issue for locals and planners in the region where hard engineering solutions have been deployed as a matter of common practice. The centre of the piece is an online workshop discussion with researchers from Sounding Coastal Change, collaborators with expertise in coastal management

from Norfolk Coast Partnership and Norfolk County Council and a sound artist. The work amounts to a great deal more than a recorded discussion of the debates, however. It comprises a complex audio narrative that weaves together human and non-human voice and environmental sounds. It is a creative artifice, not a documentary record and the purpose of the audio is to stimulate interest and reflection amongst listeners in ways that might encourage better informed discussion around a specific issue and highlight some of the choices and opportunities available (see Revill 2021).

A sound artist worked with the assembled sonic elements - overlaying, mixing, altering pitch, rhythm and cadence – to provide a sense of flux and dynamism designed to conjure the very the environmental processes featured in the work. Sand dunes are living entities that continually change – sometimes quickly over weeks and months , and sometimes slowly and imperceptibly over decades and centuries. It is this very mutability that enables dune structures to absorb the sea's power, providing an organic coastal defence from flooding. The work evokes the vitality of the natural sand dune systems, as well as voicing the key species that dwell there: the marram grass, the natterjack toads, the skylarks. These constituents are fundamental to the dune's health and to the region's flourishing biodiversity. By creatively embracing some of the characteristics of natural dune processes, the postcard creates a space for the sand dunes processes to be performed and become legible to wider publics.

The postcard does not tell or instruct, but instead raises an awareness and places in the foreground questions that enhance sensitivity and attentiveness. The aim is to raise as a matter of concern, the idea of 'living sand dunes' as practical nature-based

responses to coastal management for North Norfolk in an age of climate change.

This is not a simple endorsement of views expressed. The overall sense of provisionally in the discussion is quite deliberate and is an invitation to the listener to find out more, to discuss further and make up their own mind.

This is how we will use this in a public workshop situation. Listening to the postcards will be used to raise issues, stimulate and provoke discussion around key topics and encourage participants to think through potential scenarios and solutions. This work and others will be used as part of the Coastal Conversations public environmental forum run out of Wells Maltings.

We take the view that decision-making and planning must itself be a learning process and needs to be thought about, theorised, and set out as learning experiences that allow a creative space for reflection, understanding others and imagining possible futures. Thought this way, learning is a process supported by creativity and curiosity (Selvi 2007).

In such engaged spaces, it is possible that publics might better understand and appreciate science and policy drivers, whilst professionals may recognise and find value in local knowledges and those grounded in everyday skills, practices and experiences. This suggests to us the importance of making art and creative works into deliberative and conversational processes which facilitate mutual learning and understanding both within and between the diverse groups involved. In the context of our work concerning planning and policy in the face of coastal flooding and erosion, trust between publics, politicians, planners and politicians is widely recognised as a major issue. For us facilitating mutual learning through creative practice is an important way of encouraging the mutual recognition and

transformative understandings that can build confidence between the diverse groups involved.

Conclusions

Sounding Coastal Change employs creative means to facilitate engagements that recognise our interdependence with often unseen and unheard environmental systems, processes and ways of life; that encourage attentiveness to the taken for granted or overlooked and attempt to inspire publics to think beyond their everyday routine experiences. Such creative ways of imagining and working through alternatives could well enable local planning consultations to go beyond current taken for granted assumptions.

The role of researcher/facilitator in this process is a case in point. Artist and educator Pablo Helguera (2011) argues that creative engagement should not only be educational in the broadest sense but also mutually transformative for the publics, practitioners and researchers involved. However, this process of mutual transformation cannot be taken for granted. Related to this, there are two broad lessons we can derive from this assertion and our experience of producing collaborative creative work with practitioners and publics.

Firstly, the need to start from where you are. Creative engagements work well when they start from participants lives and experiences rather than an academic theory, piece of formal knowledge or set of policy objectives. In this context the educational imperative shaped by the need to produce enjoyable experiences where participants are learning on terms they recognise, identify with. This requires time building

and allowing to grow the dynamics of trust and respect that enable meaningful conversations and exchanges to take place.

Second, and this can be difficult for artists and indeed some planners, there is a real requirement to set up creative processes and learning experiences and then stand back and allow participants to make the process, the creative artifacts and the learning their own. This means the process might take directions and reach conclusions artists, academic facilitators and planners do not anticipate. Though the ramifications of this could be potentially far reaching, we are not advocating a simple free-for-all, but rather a significant amount of humility on the part of artists, academic facilitators and planners to let go of the process whilst supplying support, information, asking questions and provoking reflection.

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