
Rights of Nature

JO DACOMBE

ABSTRACT Artist Jo Dacombe remembers a school residency when she was working as an Associate Artist at Nottingham Contemporary, a large contemporary arts centre. Through the residency, she worked with a group of primary children of mixed ages to explore themes from the exhibition *Rights of Nature*. She describes the experience for the children, the nature of a creative enquiry-based practice and how this process benefitted this particular group of children. The impact was far-reaching, not just developing their creative skills but also their self-confidence and personal connections with nature and how we treat the world. Jo concludes with her reflections on the benefits of creative projects to engage young children with the nature around them.

Introduction

In 2015, I was working as an Associate Artist with Nottingham Contemporary, a large contemporary arts centre that I had worked with since it opened in 2009.[1] In fact, I had worked with them before they opened. In the run-up to the opening of this new venue, five Associate Artists had been brought together as a team to devise the ethos and direction of what would become the Learning Programme at Nottingham Contemporary. This is significant because the work was devised by artists rather than teachers. Although all the artists had extensive experience working within education, they started from the practice of artists, and this meant that the development of the learning provision at Nottingham Contemporary had a unique methodology from the start.

The Rights of Nature Exhibition

That year, Nottingham Contemporary was hosting a large exhibition of over 20 artists, called *Rights of Nature*, reflecting on our current environmental crisis – economic, political and cultural, as well as ecological – and curated by T.J. Demos and Alex Farquharson, with Irene Aristizábal.[2] Focusing on the Americas, *Rights of Nature* contrasted the dominant view that humans are

superior to nature and therefore can extract from the Earth whatever they need, resulting in its destruction, with the beliefs of indigenous peoples, who have always worked with, rather than against, Mother Earth and have become the strongest voices in trying to protect her. The concept that 'nature has rights' in the same way that people do was central to the curating of the exhibition – that when people have their rights violated, they should have access to some form of justice, therefore when nature suffers from destruction, it should also have a right to redress. If a person is assaulted, the culprit is punished, whereas when a river is polluted, there is no consequence to the perpetrator. In some countries, such as Bolivia, they have now enshrined in law that natural entities such as rivers have the same rights as people.

As an Associate Artist, I was asked to work with schools to explore the themes in the exhibition. One particular project placed me in a school as an artist in residence for two days a week over four weeks, to work with a group of 13 children of mixed ages from Years 1 to 6 in an intensive week of art-making and thinking, exploration and experimentation.

The project was funded by The Mighty Creatives [3], an organisation working across the East Midlands dedicated to transforming the lives of children and young people through creativity, arts and culture, along with match-funding from the schools involved. Our engagement was part of the Innovation Investment partnership, and we had four Nottingham Contemporary Associate Artists working with nine schools in Nottingham. The partnership enabled work in schools over a longer time period to support targeted groups. The following describes my project with one school, where the children selected for the project were quiet and shy. They were selected because the school thought that they were not achieving their potential; they were intimidated in classroom situations and were not thriving, unable to make their voices heard and suffering low confidence.

My personal aims were, through creative activity, to connect the children to the themes of *Rights of Nature*, climate change and people's relationship with the natural world. My work as an artist has long explored our relationship with the natural world, through landscape, creative walking practices, and concerns with climate change and networks of consequence. My work takes many forms in different ways: I have worked with archaeologists to explore the effects of human action on landscapes, and with mental health services to research the benefits of connections with nature for people with depression or psychosis; I have undertaken projects in schools that explore ideas of extinction and loss, and created work that explores our relationship with the sensory and material world.

The Experience of the Exhibition

Our project started by taking the whole class on a visit to the *Rights of Nature* exhibition. The work in the exhibition, as in the majority of Nottingham Contemporary's exhibitions, was varied and challenging. Many of the children,

who had not been to a gallery before, were surprised at the lack of 'pictures hanging on walls'. *Rights of Nature* contained many installations that transformed the rooms into exciting and surprising spaces. One room had soil strewn across the floor and mechanical butterflies beating their wings. A full-size stone fossilised petrol pump stood in the middle of one room, its hose winding across the floor. Sculptures of hybrid people-creatures, made of wood and scrap pieces, sat quietly around another room, but then the next space immersed you as you entered, to be surrounded by digital projections and sounds. Not at all the quiet, clinical space one might expect in a traditional art gallery, Nottingham Contemporary is often noisy, with sounds playing and schoolchildren talking. The Associate Artists liked to run their workshops in the galleries when possible, and visitors would often walk in on these strange and exciting events: children lying on the floor amongst the artworks and drawing; children performing gestural movements as if in conversation with sculptures; adults seated in a circle loudly expressing ideas on feminist manifestos in relation to the art surrounding them. As an educator, I noticed that this experience tended to unfold in a similar way each time. On arrival at the gallery, the children would have been briefed to be quiet, reverent, not to touch anything and to walk in single file. They would arrive solemnly, take off their coats and stash them in the education room. I would then introduce myself, and they would listen calmly and respectfully. I would explain a little about what we were going to see, but not too much, then split them into groups and give each group a creative task to do which would give them a purpose and way of connecting to the work in the gallery. And then we would go into the galleries ...

Everything would change. As the large doors swung open, the sounds, lights and movement of the artworks would be revealed, and I would see the children's eyes widen. This was not what they had expected! As the visit went on, the noise in the galleries would rise gradually as the children's excitement overflowed, giving us, of course, the challenge of reminding them not to touch things, please! There were numerous occasions when a visitor in the galleries would approach me and say: 'This is wonderful. The gallery really comes alive when the children are here!'

Enquiry-Based Residency

Having had this exciting experience, I then had the privilege to go into the school and work with my select group of children. Our work would follow the experience of the gallery and, as an artist, my approach was to lead the children through an enquiry-based creative practice towards forming a body of work exactly as a practising contemporary artist would. The sessions were not about learning skills and techniques, although obviously I would support this and help the children achieve what they were aiming for. Rather, the focus was on their ideas and how to create pieces that were unique to each of them and showed their own personal response to the theme of the project. I think this was incredibly important, not only for their own individual confidence and sense of

self, but also for the theme and how they were each able to connect to it in a profound way.

The school was located quite centrally in Nottingham, in a built-up area opposite some industrial units. As with most schools, it had a high wire fence all the way around it, and strong security measures at the gate. All the way around the buildings, the areas were tarmacked over, although they had one strip of earth and grass with a few trees along one edge, but at the time this had been fenced off due to the heavy rain which had made it too muddy to access. The school had introduced a few planters to mitigate the relentless grey straight lines, but, as with most city schools in lower-income areas, they did not have the resources to go much further. As a result, I was working on a project about nature in a place that was concrete, brick walls and tarmac.

And yet ... we decided to explore our immediate environment and look for nature. We asked ourselves, 'What have we done here?' The built environment was not making space for nature, and yet we found evidence of nature and life everywhere. We found that if we searched closely enough, we found plants and moss growing out of cracks; we found ladybirds and spiders in parts of broken walls; ants were running everywhere. The children became quite excited about the amount of natural life that was, in fact, everywhere and all around us.

Developing Ideas and Individual Directions

As the weeks went on, the children were asked to find their own idea to work on, with some working individually and some working in pairs. We explored ways of making, sometimes discarding them, which again was new to the children, to consider that some experiments did not need to be kept or go anywhere, but could just be part of a process that leads to something else. Each day, the children would start to become more confident in their own explorations and begin to articulate their own ideas. I would sit with each child individually and ask them what they were making, why and had they thought about it this way or that way. At the beginning of each session, we would discuss the progress of each person's work, and agree what they would be aiming for in that session so that they had a sense of purpose, but the aim was formed by themselves – their own ideas and direction were given recognition and importance.

The school supported the project by providing a dedicated teaching assistant to support all the sessions. She knew the children well and was able to observe their responses, as well as give them the confidence of having a familiar and caring person present throughout.

The school also gave us a dedicated space to work in. They had had a new classroom built as a separate space from the rest of the school, standing alone on one side of the playground. We had sole use of the space for the whole period, which meant we could really use it like an artist's studio, allowing us to stick up work and ideas on the walls and leave them there to

inspire us, and not having to clear things away between sessions, so that we could walk straight back into an exciting and creative space. We could organise the space as we wanted, to enable us to do what we needed to do; if we needed to clear all the tables to one side to make space to come together, we could do that. We were also physically separate from the rest of the goings-on in the school, which removed any distractions and freed us from feelings of intimidation or being judged. The space became our own safe space to explore and experiment freely.

Our Own Exhibition

At the end of the residency, we created an exhibition in the school hall for the other schoolchildren, teachers and parents to visit. The resulting artworks that the children made were varied, ambitious and hugely inventive. They had completely broken away from any ideas that 'artwork' should be hung on a wall, and they took over the hall space and created an engaging and vibrant exhibition. The artworks were dotted around the hall space, but we made sure that there was a wide flow area for visitors to get around the exhibition, but at the same time making them feel like they were immersed in amongst all the creativity.

Responding to our theme and all the ideas we had explored, the children made a wonderful variety of work which showed the breadth with which they had explored the subject. Two girls created a 'Home for Nature', which looked a bit like a table-top theatre set. Two other girls created a mobile artwork, a little like a train of cardboard boxes tied together, which they pulled around the exhibition. It was a continually moving work of small habitats, with the idea that nature had to keep moving to find new spaces to live. One boy created a large hanging work, which had curling green and brown paper tumbling from it like a waterfall forest. Inside the tangles, I helped him to secure a hidden MP3 player with a speaker. The sound that played was his own composition of noises – imagined sounds from nature. He had invented a number of sounds that he wanted to hear, including roars, snaps, chirps and hums, to evoke a thriving natural environment. Then he rehearsed our group of children to make these sounds, which he 'conducted' as I recorded them.

Another group of three very young girls created a huge installation out of plastic school chairs. They piled them up into a sort of random sculpture, with legs sticking out everywhere: a plastic, ugly, grey heap of chairs. Then they stuck their tiny sculptures all over the chairs – little, delightful bugs and snails that they had been making out of white clay, blu tack and wire. They put their tiny creatures all over and inside the sculpture, evoking that sense of the tiny bugs which would find a home wherever they could in our man-made world.

Two boys decided to work together to create the 'Spirit of Nature'. This was a wonderful hybrid beast, made of cardboard, wire and tissue paper, painted and covered in patterned paper. It had huge bat-like wings, a long tail, scaly skin like a snake, and a fierce head with huge ears and large eyes. We

decided to hang this creature from the ceiling in the school hall, where it soared impressively above our visitors.

Once all our artworks were in place, we decided that we needed something to connect them all. We were talking about ecosystems and how everything is connected and influences everything else, and we felt we should represent this somehow. We found a tree about six feet tall growing in a pot in the school, and moved it to the centre of the hall space. We then worked together using coloured tape on the floor to 'draw' roots wiggling from the tree, radiating out towards all our artworks, where the roots would 'grow' around our works, thus connecting them all together. The result drew all the individual works into one installation and made a whole connected environment to explore.

When the visitors came, including parents who had been invited to visit at the end of schooltime, the children proudly and confidently spoke about their work to their visitors, and explained where their ideas had come from. Each child got a chance to shine. Their work was so inventive and different that the visitors were truly impressed and fascinated by the ideas which the works encompassed. Because each piece was unique and created entirely from the children's own ideas, they knew that they were the only ones who could really explain where it had come from. Also, the uniqueness meant that there was no comparing of each other's work; each work was taken on its own merit, and I think this helped them feel confident about their own creations. For me, making art is a power. You create something that did not exist before and you bring it into the world, your own invention, and it only exists because of you. If you are not a confident person, or feel that you have no voice, the act of making art means you make a difference to the world by bringing it into existence. Watching the children talk about their art, I thought that they felt this power too.

The Impact of the Innovation Investment Projects

Nottingham Contemporary saw huge value in this targeted approach, and the Innovation Investment projects inspired them to continue this approach with their future projects in schools. As the project manager reported:

We found that the focus and approach of the programme really suited our artists' approach to learning – building relationships and confidence, being able to deliver flexibly in response to learners' needs and interests, and supporting peer-led work. Working with pupils over time with the support of an experienced, dedicated member of the school team meant our artists could see a visible difference in the pupils they were working with, and were able to deliver a responsive programme of workshops.

The schools saw the value of this approach too, and there was a number of examples of children really transforming in confidence and motivation. One

teacher cited the opportunity ‘to follow our artists’ journeys and see them create their own individual pieces – pieces which allowed their ideas and personalities to come through’ – as the most valued aspect of the project. The teachers told us that their children were continuing to create at home. In the evaluation feedback, the teachers talked about changes in body language, new-found abilities to justify their work and challenge, and greater volume of speech and increased willingness to speak, but we also heard things like ‘they seem at ease’ or ‘they just seem happier’. Being relaxed and having greater levels of interaction with their fellow participants, peers and supporting adults was noted. The teachers told us that the young people were able to talk more confidently as the days progressed, and some displayed a new confidence when sharing ideas in a larger group. The teaching assistant supporting my project summed it up: ‘From the initial meeting until their exhibition, the project has been an incredible journey, which provided an outstanding opportunity for the children to observe, imagine, create and share their work with peers, parents and staff’.

Personal Connections with Nature

And what of climate change? I believe that the very personal connections that we were able to make through working intensely with this small group of children resulted in profound connections with the natural world and deep thinking about the ‘rights of nature’ and what that could mean. The project helped the children bring the issues of climate change, so huge and unfathomable to many, down to a personal level about our impact on nature that they could see was happening in their own surroundings, even in their own school, and they felt a deep concern for nature that was genuine. A lot of what we know about climate change is based on science, and I love science, but for many people to really engage with these issues, they need to feel it, be emotionally connected to what is happening. I believe that art and creative activity can allow this personal and emotional connection to be made.

In order for children to truly connect with issues of climate change or the ‘rights of nature’ and the impact of human activity on the Earth, it is necessary to involve them in something on a smaller scale that they can perceive and truly identify with. In noticing nature all around us, struggling yet persisting to live despite human efforts to destroy or control it, we became more aware of the direct impact of our activity on the natural flora and fauna around us, and became more cautious and respectful. In exploring these issues and ideas creatively, we were able to understand our own thoughts and feelings about nature and articulate them through art-making. I believe this will be an experience that made a difference to the children through a sensory connection with the world, which has a very different effect from learning through textbooks, and perhaps suited these particular children better. Make space for connecting creatively with nature.

Notes

- [1] Nottingham Contemporary is a contemporary arts centre in Nottingham, with a mission to offer international art for everyone for free. It has been described as 'the most inspiring gallery in the UK' (*Guardian*).
<https://www.nottinghamcontemporary.org>
- [2] A link to the *Rights of Nature* exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary can be found at: <https://nottinghamcontemporary.org/whats-on/rights-of-nature/>
- [3] The Mighty Creatives website is at: <https://themightycreatives.com/>

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