



Art college students visiting Irish-based ecological artist Cathy Fitzgerald's woodland, site of The Hollywood Forest Story Photo: Gwen Wilkinson

## Understanding how Creativity Works for a Better World: Unifying Insights From Ecological Art Practice and Values-Based Transformative ESD Learning



Cathy Fitzgerald

Dr. Cathy Fitzgerald, originally from New Zealand and now based in Ireland, is a dedicated ecological art practitioner and researcher. Witnessing a global lack of ecoliteracy in adult art education, she, alongside philosopher Dr. Nikos Patedakis, founded the Haumea Ecovercity in 2019. Their independent online platform provides transformative ecoliteracy and Earth Charter-inspired courses, fostering ethical and compassionate creativity among cultural professionals. Cathy, an Earth Charter alumna and educator, is a prominent figure in Irish ecoliteracy. As a Research Fellow at the Burren College of Art, she recently led comprehensive Earth Charter courses for creatives under an Irish Arts Council initiative. Additionally, she played a pivotal role in shaping the Irish Green Party Arts and Heritage Policy (2023) through the lens of the Earth Charter.



## Insights for Sustainability Educators and Ecological Art Practitioners

This article delves into the intersections between emerging ecological art practices and values-based transformative learning for sustainability education. During my participation in the 5-month Earth Charter International Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) course in 2021, I was pleasantly surprised to uncover substantial synergies between these two domains. These connections became more apparent as I subsequently developed and delivered a 7-week online ESD Earth Charter course tailored for creative and cultural professionals, reaching Irish and some international learners over recent years.

Within our courses, we introduce participants to the ethical principles of the people's Earth Charter, guiding them to use their creativity more wisely for inspiring positive action towards a better world. The participants engaged with the Earth Charter, including the Children's Little Earth Charter, recognising the value of its clear integrated principles and accessible, inspirational language. The course facilitated a deeper understanding of sustainability and drew from the considerable intellectual and creative contributions of those who have explored the Earth Charter over several decades, particularly drawing from the wonderful Earth Charter podcast series and the planetary Earth Story Collective. This exploration empowered participants to articulate the aims and ethos of ecological art practices, environmental art, art education and cultural policy for

sustainability for their cultural context. A special acknowledgment goes to Irish artist and mother Phoebe Cope, who translated the Earth Charters into Irish, recognising its relevance as an inclusive, timeless moral compass for her children and a means to enhance sustainability awareness across the Irish creative sector.



Cathy with artist and Gaeilgeoir Phoebe Cope, Irish Translator of the Earth Charter, Drummin Bog, County Carlow, Ireland, 2022.

While participating in the ESD course, I observed occasional reference to the value of artistic activity for sustainability education, particularly in Earth Charter, Education, and the Sustainable Development Goal 4.7 (Vilela and Jiménez, eds., 2020). These references caught my attention, given my knowledge of the emergent ecological art practice field, which has been a marginal field in the contemporary art world since the 1970s. I recognised that the two decades of values-based ESD development could contribute to the appreciation of the ecological art practice field, and correspondingly, the ecological art field could deepen awareness of the immense value of creative practice for ESD transformative learning. To me, knowledge exists in both domains that can mutually



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reinforce and propel the 'quicken holism' toward a life-sustaining era—the invitation articulated in the Earth Charter's 'Way Forward' conclusion.

### **Ecological Art Practice and Ecoliteracy Teaching: A Personal Journey**

To contextualise these ideas, my involvement in exploring ecological art practice traces back to the late '90s, and is notably channelled through my ecological art practice, *The Hollywood Forest Story* (ongoing since 2008). This work revolves around learning and collaborating with leading Pro Silva Irish ecological foresters to revitalise a small monoculture tree plantation in rural Ireland, reshaping it into a more resilient forest ecosystem with new-to-Ireland Close-to-Nature forestry management. Employing a creative narrative approach via photography, video, and blog writings, I convey the challenges and rewards of embracing these continuous cover forestry practices ([HollywoodForest.com](http://HollywoodForest.com)). This endeavour is a case study in the international online Library of Creative Sustainability (<https://www.creativecarbonscotland.com/library/the-hollywood-forest-story/>),

forming the cornerstone of my creative practice-led PhD titled *The Ecological Turn: Living Well with Forests To Articulate Eco-Social Art Practices Using a Guattari Ecosophy and Action Research Framework* (Fitzgerald, 2018).

My practice and research deepen my appreciation for how collaborative endeavours blend creativity with ecological insights. These endeavours radically challenge conventional creative practices, yet have immense social power to meaningfully inspire practitioners and their communities to engage in ecological reflection and restoration now, and for future generations.

Despite my background in research science and a doctoral qualification in ecological art practice research, I experienced firsthand the challenges posed by ecological insights for creative practice. Since 2019, I have felt a compelling need to share my knowledge and develop ecoliteracy courses for creatives and cultural professionals, particularly in light of these unprecedented times. However, concerns about my



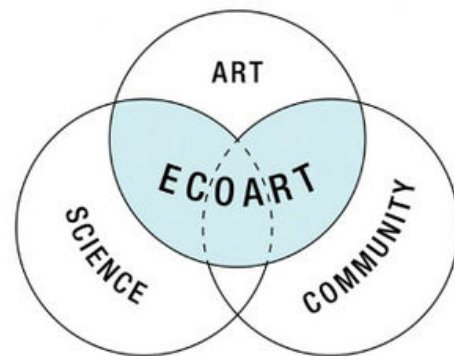
capacity to do so arose due to my limited teaching experience and because I knew that ecological insights represent a paradigm shift which would introduce inherent complexity and emotional challenges.

### Developing Ecoliteracy Courses for Creatives and Cultural Practitioners

In my new role as an educator, I am indebted to the educational insights and extensive wide-ranging research of my Californian-based, eco-aesthetic-oriented, philosopher colleague, Dr Nikos Patedakis [DangerousWisdom.org]. His perspectives, summarised in 'salon culture and wisdom-based learning' [Patedakis, 2021], significantly inform my understanding of what propels ecoliteracy education for collective, cultural renewal.

By embracing ecoliteracy as a lifelong journey of unlearning and relearning, we confront deeply ingrained life-limiting perspectives with our course participants to comprehend responsibilities for personal, collective, planetary, and intergenerational well-being. This intentional and reflective process involves compassionate contemplative practices, fosters reconnection with the broader Earth community, to assist learners to develop an ecological worldview. As we navigate this path, our transformative learning process emphasises critical literacy, integrated moral reasoning [underscored by the Earth Charter's vision and clarity], and the mastery of a holistic

language, enabling reflection of diverse wisdom knowledge, ecological philosophy, and sustainability frameworks. Establishing a safe learning space is imperative to nurture collective dialogue and social connection and accelerates creative incubation in the pursuit of a more sustainable, equitable, and peaceful future.



The three interconnecting fields of ecological art practice. Image developed by the editors, 2018 for EcoArt an Action book [Geffen et al., 2022]. Image courtesy of the editors.

Developing these courses for creatives and cultural professionals rests on my work to develop and research ecological art practice. But what is ecological art [ecoart] practice? In their comprehensive yet accessible handbook, *EcoArt in Action: Activities, Case Studies, and Provocations for Classrooms and Communities*' [Geffen et al., eds., 2022], the professional international EcoArt Network, established in 1998, defines ecological art practice as ethically committed to social justice in both content and form, aiming to inspire communities' care, respect, and dialogue for the long-term flourishing of environments. Such practices emphasise experiential learning from the influence of educational visionaries such as John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and others [ibid, p.3].



As creatively facilitated collaborative endeavours, these practices draw on developments in the socially engaged art practice field. One could simply describe ecological art practices as employing 'Creativity as an Act of Love' for the world, as reflected in one of our course titles. However, describing these practices is challenging due to the diverse possibilities of creatively exploring our connection to various environments. Sometimes, confusingly the term 'ecoart' is loosely applied to artworks and land art with environmental themes.

However, practitioners in the emerging field of ecological art practice set themselves apart by facilitating inclusive activities within communities, guided by creative approaches. They welcome various ways of understanding, incorporating experiential, artistic, contemplative, scientific, theoretical, and traditional knowledge, to help people comprehend and navigate the path toward living harmoniously with their environments.

Such collaborative processes facilitate dialogue for ecological awareness that evolves agency for systemic changes to envision how a community might understand ecological healing and restoration relevant to their location, and in which everyone has something to contribute. A key text reviewing these novel formations of creative practice, exemplified by the late pioneering ecological art practitioners, Helen and Newton Harrison, refers to how these multifaceted transdisciplinary practices advance important, inclusive

'conversational shifts' [Adcock, 1992], for integrated sustainability action.

Yet, despite the pressing needs of our time and the increasing demand for skilled ecological art practitioners, challenges persist in accessing integrated ecological art practice education. This is primarily due to the requirement for a radical reconceptualization of education as a whole (and why our courses align with the concept of an 'Ecoversity'). The magnitude of this necessary shift in education impedes the field's contribution to usher in an ecological era.

My doctoral work explains how I and other ecological artists operate in these new ways. I successfully argued that these new creative forms could be more simply explained as a form of action research. Furthermore, given how they operate to invite collective reflection, embrace various ways of knowing, and that the key outcome of such practices is not necessarily creative works but emergent changes in perception, they provide much-needed informed conversations to envision and promote actions for better world, an era promoted as the Symbiocene [Fitzgerald, 2018, 2019, 2021].

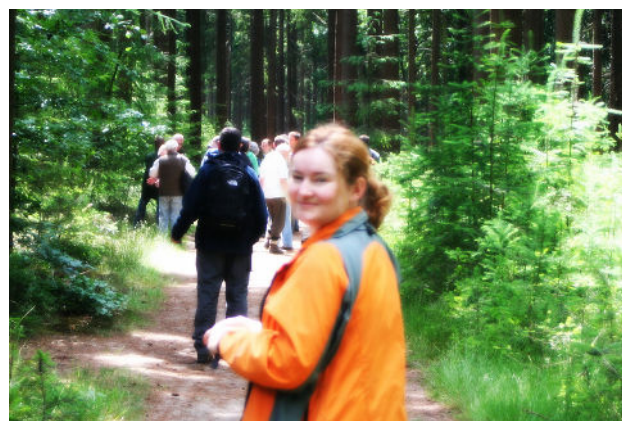


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Photo Credit: Cathy Fitzgerald

## Realising Valuable Connections between Ecological Art Practice and ESD Transformative Learning for Sustainability

While researching ecological art pioneers, the Harrisons, for my doctoral research, I encountered Charles Garoian's (2012) observation that their practices extended beyond the art world, to suggest a holistic model for sustainability education, that at that time, was not appreciated. I referenced this insightful conclusion in a footnote within my doctoral thesis and found it resonating with me once again while I was attending the ESD Earth Charter course.

Through my exposure to the ESD Earth Charter course, I appreciated similarities between action research I used to clarify ecological art practice and transformative learning used to explain the transformative processes at work in sustainability education. Through the work of Hathaway (2011) and others that I encountered on the ESD Earth Charter programme, I can now articulate with clarity that a core outcome of ecological art practice lies in the transformation of peoples' worldviews. Specifically, such practices cultivate an ecological perspective, and inspire people to live well with the web of life, in perpetuity.

The elucidation of values as the cornerstone for guiding transformative learning in ESD not only assisted me in discerning the ethical underpinnings of ecological art practice but also provided a profound perspective when examined through the lens of the remarkable people's Earth Charter (Earth Charter



Commission 2000], for practitioners of ecological art and cultural professionals alike. The Earth Charter is a covenant with the broader Earth community, forged through an inspiring global civil society process spanning over a decade in the 90s and extensively scrutinised since [the Earth Charter has twice been endorsed by UNESCO], and stands as a robust framework for ecoliteracy learning and ethical considerations for integrated sustainability action. It incorporates fundamental universal principles, such as ‘respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, social and economic justice, democracy, nonviolence, and peace’, but also critically envisions humanity’s aspirations for a well-lived existence for people, the planet, and future generations.

Given that ecological art practices are inherently social operations, the Earth Charter’s lucid articulation of these principles, that references the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [UDHR], [UN General Assembly 1948] with contributions from individuals across diverse disciplines, cultures, and traditions, proved to be particularly valuable. It offered profound clarity concerning the ethical intentions and moral reasoning embedded in ecological art practice—intentions often only expressed intuitively within this emerging field.

The ethical insights offered by the Earth Charter significantly deepen foundational observations of art historian Matilsky [1992] and art theorist Boetzkes [2010, p. 200] about ecological and Earth Art practices.

Moreover, the Earth Charter provides a framework for contemplating how individuals within communities can understand the potential of their diverse contributions to ecological art programmes.

### **Sustainability Education Findings Mirror Ecological Writings in the Creative Sector**

A particularly impactful moment in my ESD Earth Charter learning journey was gaining a profound appreciation for the Earth Charter’s overarching ecological vision and finding affirmation of the immense educational shift required across the world. It helped me understand more deeply that educating creatives in ecoliteracy is part of an immense cultural shift to cultivate lifelong holistic ‘transformative learning in education systems at all levels’ so all people develop an ecological worldview [...] ‘as a necessity for our survival and that of future generations’, as described in The Berlin Declaration on Education for Sustainable Development [UNESCO 2022].

For further context about integrative education needed for ecological art practitioners and educators, I highly recommend the books of Sam Crowell, Earth Charter International Council Member and sustainability educator Professor Emeritus, including *The Re-Enchantment of Learning: A Manual for Teacher Renewal and Classroom Transformation* [Crowell & Caine, 2001], *Emergent Teaching: A Path of Creativity, Significance, and Transformation* [Crowell & Reid-Marr, 2013], and *Earth Charter Pedagogy Book 1: Integrating Peace Education* [Crowell 2017], and *Earth Charter Pedagogy Book 2: Emergence, for ESD* [Crowell, 2018].



I was fascinated with Crowell's plea for 'the re-enchantment of learning' because it aligns with the foresighted writings of the late, and still under-appreciated art critic Suzi Gablik, who in the 1990s, advocated for *The Re-enchantment of Art* (1991) and engaged in dialogues with pioneering creatives exploring ecological understanding in *Conversations before the End of Time* (1995). Gablik echoes Crowell's appeals for an ecological pedagogy that propels sustainable cultural renewal, insisting on comprehensive whole-of-education changes across sectors and society. I smiled too, when I found the seminal eco-theologian Thomas Berry, who inspired Gablik's initial ecological writings, 'The Ecological Imperative' (1992), also contributed to the early efforts for the Earth Charter and his life's work continues to inspire many sustainability educators and Earth Charter advocates.

Moreover, the writings of higher education Professor Emeritus, Peter Blaze Corcoran have proven invaluable in comprehending the significance of the Earth Charter in defining sustainability for the creative sector. Corcoran's work illuminates the Earth Charter's role in providing the clearest and most accessible integrated definition of sustainable development to date [Corcoran, 2023; Clugston and Corcoran 2023] and provides creative interpretation of the Earth Charter in *A Voice for the Earth: American Writers Respond to the Earth Charter* [Corcoran and Wohlpart, 2008]. In the near future, I will be introducing Corcoran and others' 'Earth Charter meal methodology' work from 2008, to other creatives across Ireland, helping them to foster more convivial, impactful

conversations about the Earth Charter and bringing its holistic, inclusive principles for a better world alive in the very food we share.

### Concluding Thoughts

In considering how sustainability education may benefit from the integrative, real world expertise of ecological art practice insights, I recommend the following resources for transformative learning educators in ESD:

- *To Life!: Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet* by Weintraub (2012);
- *Green Acres: Artists Farming Fields, Greenhouses and Abandoned Lots* [Spaid, Platow, Amoss (Ed.), Bjørnard and Kaminsky, 2012];
- *Ecovention Europe, Art to Transform Ecologies, 1957-2017* [Spaid, 2017];
- the aforementioned *EcoArt in Action: Activities, Case Studies, and Provocations for Classrooms and Communities* [Geffen et al., eds., 2022];
- and *The Work of Art in the Age of Planetary Destruction* [eds. Prasad and Osrin, 2023].
- Additionally, I recommend the book by the pioneering Harrisons on their nearly five-decade-long work in ecological art practices around the world, titled *The Time of the Force Majeure: After 45 years Counterforce is on the Horizon* [Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, 2016].

Unfortunately, Helen and Newton are no longer with us. I was fortunate to be invited to meet Newton last year, and agree with environmentalist Lillian Ball who stated, "they were forces of nature whose ongoing influence will be felt throughout





generations” [Sizonenko, 2022]. Attesting to their significant contribution to this field, several exhibitions to celebrate their California work are scheduled for the San Diego area in 2024-2025 [Sizonenko, 2022].



From the late 1960s and for nearly four decades, the late pioneering ecological art practitioners Helen and Newton Harrison were clear that their collaborative and co-creative, ecological art practices were to help us all reflect and serve the web of life. Newton Harrison invited Cathy to present at his final research workshop 'Listening to the Web of Life' for ecological art practitioners, scholars, scientists and curators, San Diego 17-18 March 2022

Encountering and sharing transformative learning with the People’s Earth Charter has had a profound impact, helping me and others across Ireland guide our creativity wisely for these challenging times. Observing creatives, art educators, and culture professionals embrace elements of the Earth Charter, making it their own in innovative ways and in the Irish language, has much promise in enhancing art-in-school residencies, improving transition year sustainability learning, and initiating creative-led inclusive dialogues on sustainability across age groups, in diverse settings.

Some time ago, all this work encouraged me to contribute to the framing of a new all Ireland Green Party Arts and Culture policy within the Earth Charter’s vision [Green

Party | Comhaontas Glas, Ireland, 2023]. This new policy has appeared in Ireland this week. I will end by sharing how former course participant, facilitator Ali Warner shared the Earth Charter to an audience at the Irish Department of Rural and Community Development showcase at Dublin Castle [Warner, November, 2023]:

“I spoke about the Earth Charter as a precious seed that had perhaps in some ways been germinating over the last few decades and may now be bearing new shoots at a time in our society when we need it most. And then I read from the Earth Charter’s ‘Preamble’ and the ‘Way Forward’ to close the event. They are such powerful, beautiful, and poetic words and so much needed now. I hope we can keep deepening our connection to the Earth Charter in these times, and that it grows in its strength in Ireland as an activating force for what we would like to see flourish in our world.”

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Haumea Ecovercity courses and resources can be found at <https://HaumeaEcovercity.ie>



Photo credit: Cathy Fitzgerald



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