

**Explorations in the practice of eco-art:
A phenomenological arts-informed research project**

by

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Acknowledgments

Welcome to you, the reader, whoever you are.

I dedicate this to Beverley Viljakainen and to arts-informed research and any work that improves our relations with the natural world.

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Abstract

This study investigated the genre of eco-art through a phenomenological arts-informed research project to augment current practices and inspire new art and art/science initiatives in schools and communities. Incorporating narrative inquiry and photography, the researcher engaged in an eco-art practice over a two-year period on a Lake Superior shoreline. The work produced took the form of ephemeral paintings done with clay on rocks, both materials found at the site. The intent of the project was twofold: to develop a practice consistent with particular environmental values and to inform eco-art pedagogy by critically considering the qualities of an eco-art practice and how they fit in an educational setting. What themes emerge for eco-art pedagogy from the study and experience of an eco-art practice? What themes emerge from the study of the work of contemporary eco-artists? Key findings were: 1) the potency of place; 2) being alone; 3) the outdoor studio; 4) a sense of adventure; 5) ephemeral qualities and other aesthetic considerations; and 6) the role of art in ecological restoration. The stories of artists in the eco-art field also emerged as an essential resource that guided and supported the research. The insights gained from the project may resonate with educators from both art and environmental science backgrounds as ways to incorporate art making as an engaging process that supports our journey towards sustainability and atonement.

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SECTION ONE

Background, Literature, and Art Review

Artists cannot change the world . . . alone. But when they make a concerted effort, they collaborate with life itself. Working with and between other disciplines and audiences, and given the chance to be seriously considered outside the rather narrow world of art, they can offer visual jolts and subtle nudges to conventional knowledge. (Lippard, 2007, as cited in Collins, 2012 p. 7)

Introduction and Purpose

For more than four decades, artists have offered ‘visual jolts’, ‘subtle nudges’ and much more with regard to ecological issues. Over the last two decades the term “eco-artist” has emerged. As a teacher, I have found my most satisfying moments at the intersection of art and ecological education and, a few years ago, I discovered the term eco-art and a growing body of work by contemporary ‘eco-artists’. Eco-art has existed for decades, but despite this fact, the definition and practice of eco-art requires study and clarification. (Collins, 2010; Weintraub, 2012). A good starting definition of eco-art comes from Greenmuseum.org: “art that helps improve our relationship with the natural world.” Eco-art is of interest at a time when our relationship with the earth needs ever more of our attention. What happens when one engages in an eco-art practice? The purpose of this thesis was to explore eco-art through an arts-informed inquiry project of creative practice. First an understanding of eco-art is established; next, arts-informed research provided an active and embodied way to study the genre of eco-art.

Studying the work of eco-artists proved to be an essential guide in this study as the work illustrates the diversity of the genre, what is possible, and what qualities are common in eco-art works and practices. This study also assesses the reflections generated from a personal eco-art practice and the ways in which eco-art projects have the capacity to connect students of all ages to places, whether it be in an intimate, immediate way, or by increasing ecological knowledge about a place such as when an art project involves actual restoration. Practicing eco-art is a path to generate

relations with the natural world, and as a subject area, it is valuable education. Despite its potential as a learning tool, eco-art gets little mention in the Ontario curriculum documents (<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca>).

Rationale

This topic emerges from a lifelong value for environmental ethics, my work as an arts educator, and my belief that the arts can contribute to environmental education. Weintraub (2012) notes the benefit of including eco-art in education: “pedagogical attention to eco art benefits the planet by funneling the creative ingenuity of art students into ventures designed to alleviate the innumerable problems that currently beleaguer the Earth and its populations”(p. xiv). The intersection of the arts and science can be an exciting place and the work of contemporary eco-artists has both merit and an ability to interest and challenge students to see their relationship with the world differently. The intention of this research, which comprised the study of eco-art through a personal practice, was to examine the features of eco-art, and direct attention to the idea that the study of what is variously known as eco-art, land art, or environmental art has educational value and in particular at the intersection of art and science. This work is significant because:

- i) While the name “eco-art” is relevant to many artists, it has not yet been collectively defined, although there have been attempts. The genre is relatively new and there is a lack of scholarly study of ecological art. According to Collins (2003) it does not have critical or pedagogical clarity. Further he argues that the arts of technology and media from painting to welding, video and cutting edge computer technology, receive support as well as educational investment. If we are to include it in the curriculum, we need a language and context within which to discuss eco-art, eco-artists, and eco-art educators. Weintraub (2013), author of a textbook on eco-art, admits she was often challenged by a

- lack of vocabulary. She suggests verbal language is developing apace with the visual language.
- ii) Eco-art education provides a way to support environmental education (Hollis, 1997; Inwood, 2009; Lankford, 1997; Orr, 2004; Song, 2007). As Inwood points out, environmental education was traditionally practiced in the scientific domain. Studying eco-art provides rich curriculum material at the potent intersection of art and science as I will illustrate later on through an examination of the work of several eco-artists.
 - iii) Eco-art is often tightly connected and tied to place and therefore provides a significant opportunity to develop sensitivity to place and reconnect to outdoor surroundings, which in turn meets some of the expectations of place-based education and addresses the issue of nature deprivation as well. (See the work of Louv (2005) for a discussion of “nature deficit disorder.”)
 - iv) In the Ontario context, *Shaping Our Schools Shaping Our Future: Environmental Education in Ontario Schools* (2007) is a Ministry of Education policy document that states that environmental education is everyone’s responsibility providing further justification for teaching eco-art.
 - v) This type of art has already been recognized as having a valuable contribution to make in higher education. For example, at the University of Waterloo, eco-art is included in course content within their Environmental and Resource Studies program and listed in the description of Master’s level environmental education course. As well, Artist Educator conferences have an increasing number of eco-art offerings and the *5th World Conference on Ecological Restoration* held in Madison Wisconsin in 2013 featured three sessions that included an art focus. These are just a few examples that illustrate how eco-art is starting to appear as subject matter in scholarly institutions and at major academic

conferences, indicating that it is time for it to be a regular part of the elementary and high school experience.

Background and Historical Context using Artworks

In order to help the reader become familiar with the subject matter, here I present a historical context by looking at selected artworks. Art follows and at times leads and challenges the concerns of society. As in other times in history, such as when the social realism movement grew out of a sensitivity to oppressive living conditions or religious themes dominated the art scene when the church played a critical role in society, so too, the eco-art genre mirrors societal concerns. In the 1960s and 1970s, societal concerns expanded to include the environment. I have chosen the following artworks, pivotal and groundbreaking at the time they were created, to represent in form and concept, the beginnings of ecological art and what I will refer to henceforward as simply eco-art.

Richard Long

In the 1960s, well-known artist Richard Long was in art school and realized he wanted to take his art making out into the wide world. *A Line Made by Walking* (1967, Figure 1) was created in a field in Wiltshire, England, where he walked backwards and forwards until the flattened grass became visible as a line. He photographed this, recording his physical intervention on the landscape. This piece is considered revolutionary for two reasons: first, it removed the three-dimensional quality assumed inherent to sculpture and, second, it made a strong case for the ephemeral in artwork and performance. Long was demonstrating and promoting the idea that only a very light touch on the earth's surface is necessary to make sculpture and this is important in setting a historical context for eco-art. *A Line Made by Walking* also emphasizes how place can be integral to the work and creative process. Long established himself as a pioneer in what is commonly known as "land art" in Britain. *A Line Made by Walking* is an example of work that motivated my own exploration of an eco-arts practice.



Figure 1. Richard Long. *A Line Made by Walking* (1967) U.K. An early example of land art. Long demonstrated sculpture could have a light touch on the earth. From <http://www.richardlong.org/Sculptures/2011sculptures/linewalking.html>

Joseph Beuys

German sculptor, performance and installation artist Joseph Beuys made a landmark work in 1982 called *7000 Oaks Action*. This piece was literally the planting of 7,000 oaks (Figure 2) and is still considered the world's largest ecological sculpture. Van Metre and Weiler (1983) stated that eco-art can be a catalyst for a heightened awareness of nature as well as a model for interdisciplinary problem-posing and problem-solving. Beuys' *7000 Oaks Action* can be seen as an example of this as it was a collaborative effort involving many people digging and planting the trees. Collaboration is a common feature of eco-art according to Inwood (2009) and Gablik (1998). Gablik (1991) was insistent in her book *The Re-enchantment of Art* that we consider collaboration rather than the individualistic and isolating way artists have often worked. Beuys is considered a pioneer practitioner for his style of art practice (Grande, 2009; Spaid, 2002). Beuys influenced and inspired numerous other eco-arts projects and artists around the world. I admire his pragmatic stance, and the fact that this work has impact that continues to this day. Early examples of eco-art foreshadow the distinctions that have evolved, and continue to do so, within eco-art practices; planting trees had

distinct political, pragmatic intent, and a different aesthetic. The work of Agnes Denes, Figure 3 illustrates this as well (see below).



Figure 2. Joseph Beuys. *7000 Oaks Action* (1982). Germany. This work became known as the largest ecological sculpture in the world. It demonstrated activism and collaboration. From <http://www.lightsgoingon.com/2011/09/art-and-ecology>

Agnes Denes

Wheatfield: A Confrontation (1982) by Agnes Denes is another classic example of an early eco-artwork (Figure 3). Literally a wheat field planted, harvested, processed, and consumed as loaves of bread in Denes' home city of New York, this piece was a plea or a statement of concern to a city that she felt had forgotten where its food came from. This creative act was copied and repeated in major cities around the world. Thus, we have another example of socially and politically engaged artwork that includes the public, with strong ecological implications as it asks a city to remember the ground where food comes from. Long, Beuys, and Denes each provide strong examples of artworks that are considered environmental artworks that take place outside the gallery, and that address ecological concerns. These works stand out as pivotal and important pieces to the genre of eco-art and add value to education by planting the seeds of inspiration for sustainability issues at educational institutions.



Figure 3. Agnes Denes. *Wheatfield: a confrontation*. 1982. New York. Another early eco-art work that included the human landscape. From http://www.bbc.co.uk/radioassets/photos/2009/6/18/60430_2.jpg

Robert Smithson

In contrast, another important early eco-art work was Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970). Blandy, Congdon, and Krug (1998) describe how early eco-artists were not always concerned with protecting or considering nature; they used the outdoors as a canvas and they called their art "earth works." Artist Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (Figure 4) is a well-known example of this approach. His landmark earthwork, a huge spiral of stones jutting out into a lake in Utah, was built in 1970. The process of making this work did not demonstrate a light touch on the earth; it required heavy machinery, which raised a certain amount of criticism for the disregard of the lake in which it was made. Smithson engaged two machine operators and rented a tractor, a huge front loader, and two dump trucks. Although his work did not demonstrate much sensitivity to the ecology of the area, *Spiral Jetty* is nonetheless important to my study because Smithson is recorded as accepting that the work would decay. He was articulate about his interest in the piece reacting to the laws and power of nature. At times, *Spiral Jetty* becomes submerged, depending on weather patterns. There has been discussion and concern about letting the work decay as the artist intended and this point of deliberation is an important one to remember when considering a definition of eco-art. Questions of ephemeral qualities, entropy, and preservation continue to be central considerations in this genre of artwork and came up regularly in relation to the personal work done I did for this study.



Figure 4. Robert Smithson. *Spiral Jetty*. 1970. Utah. Smithson articulated clearly that he wished natural forces at the site to contribute to the work and that he wanted it to be left to break down naturally. From http://file.blog-24.com/utli/60000/57000/56679/file/land_art/Robert-smithson

Setting the context and looking at some historical background such as noted above in my discussion of these select eco-artists convinced me that this study must include a look at artworks while I pursued my own eco-art practice. According to Art Gallery curator, Glenn Alison (personal communication 2009), artworks are objects of knowledge; thus we must also examine the art itself while considering the role eco-art can play in supporting ecological education and action. For more examples and descriptions of eco-artists and their works, see Appendix A.

Defining Eco-art

A definition and set of defining characteristics for eco-art must be attempted even though eco-art has continued to evolve and become more complex. Blandy, Congdon, and Krug (1998) talk about a broad definition of eco-art by looking at certain orientations that eco-artists have, including “use of ordinary materials, consideration of nature and ethnicity (society), recycling and location, gender and eco feminism, environmental devastation, and ecological and cultural restoration” (p. 233). These authors submit that eco-artists propose a restorative attitude. However, restoring a *relationship* with the land is not explicitly noted and this grew to be an interest of mine.

Contemporary eco-artists “raise provocative questions about nature, community, and culture that reflect the complex character of our relationship with the natural world” (Graham, 2007).

Educator Anne Rosenthal (2003), who identifies as an eco-feminist theorist and as an artist. works as a college level environmental art teacher, and is articulate on the subject of eco-art and teaching it: “By its very nature, eco-art is multidisciplinary . . . artists draw from diverse disciplines, including art, ecology, landscape architecture, urban planning, and history, to restore damaged ecosystems, interpret environmental and cultural histories, and reveal systems problems and solutions” (p. 154). That artists draw from different disciplines and are possibly drawn into partnerships is illustrated later in the description of work by eco-artists. Rosenthal also makes reference to a restorative attitude.

As noted above, Greenmuseum.org suggests a good starting definition: art that helps improve our relationship with the natural world. The website also describes such eco-art as ephemeral (intentionally meant to disappear or transform), as being designed for a particular place, and/or involving collaborations between artists and others, such as scientists, educators, or community groups (distributed ownership). I have found that, as a genre, eco-art has extraordinary diversity, but there is agreement that within the diversity exist threads of commonality (Weintraub, 2012). Weintraub (2012) includes ‘eco-centrism’ as one such common ingredient, which she defines as “the principle that humans are not more important than other entities on Earth” (p. 7). All of these qualities drew me to eco-art, but in particular I was interested in art that puts us in relation to nature, art that is ephemeral, and art that measures its success by its restorative quality. To further this discussion, I ask how an artist who practices eco-art might define it and how art educators might approach a definition.

Definitions from Eco-artists and Eco-art Educators

I have included definitions from three artists and three eco-art educators. Eco-artist Lynn Hull received acclaim for her artworks that made an effort to improve wildlife habitat. Her artistic efforts expanded the preliminary idea of what eco-art might be. Hull states that eco-art is art that can

reclaim and remediate damaged environments and her art actually strives to restore ecosystems in artistic and often aesthetic ways (www.greenmuseum.org). She has described and defined eco-art as art that:

- i) informs and interprets nature and its processes, or educates us about environmental problems;
- ii) is concerned with environmental forces and materials, creating artworks affected or powered by wind, water, lightning, even earthquakes;
- iii) re-envisions our relationship to nature, proposing new ways for us to co-exist with our environment. (www.eco-art.org)

For the purposes of this study, I was most interested in the last point, although the second one certainly piques interest about works that involve lightning and earthquakes. Eco-art is bursting with surprises.

In *Ecological Aesthetics* (2004) Herman Prigann, eco-artist, editor, and author working in Spain and other parts of Europe, highlights artist involvement in ecological conservation. He states that eco-art can involve natural events as material. Prigann also says that these sculptural places are not to be preserved and restored, but instead simply entrusted to ecological processes. He too talks about an ephemeral quality and a collaboration with nature, both important ideas to present to students to broaden their ideas about art making and ecological learning. It follows, then, to look at eco-art from the view of educators who include it in their teaching practice.

Towards a Theoretical Framework

Here I describe one metaphor and two models for eco-art education. Inwood (2009) studied teachers working to develop eco-arts curriculum. As a result, she developed a “shades of green” model, a metaphor that I have found useful when presenting the subject of eco-art. This model describes a scale that weighs the integrity and depth of the art activity (Inwood, 2010). For example,

taking students sketching outdoors might be represented by medium shade of green, Earth Day posters would be considered light green, and restoring a riparian buffer zone with stabilizing sculptures would be categorized as dark green. This metaphor gives students and educators a scale with which to discuss eco-art projects and assess their integrity.

Tim Collins, an artist and educator, has pursued clarification on several aspects of eco-art. He and artist Reiko Goto developed a circular model (Figure 5) to illustrate how art affects society, providing a framework from which to discuss ecological art practices. It is a model that describes three modes of practice: lyrical expression, critical engagement, and transformative action. As it contributes to our ability to discuss eco-art, I refer to this model several times throughout the thesis.

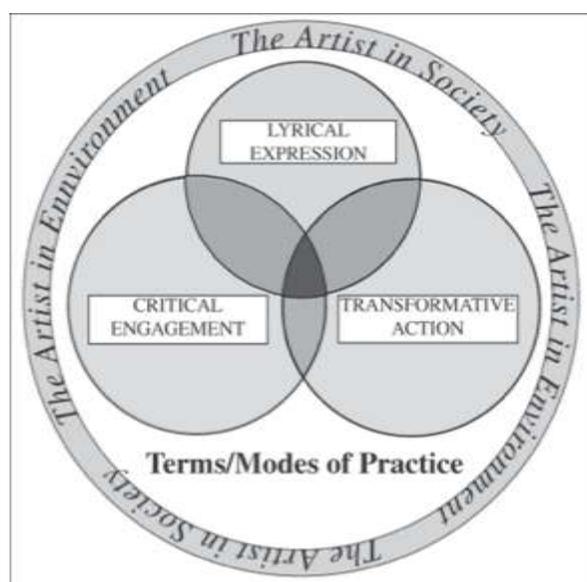


Figure 5. Goto and Collins' graphic representation of artists' modes of practice within a social-environmental setting (Collins 2003, p. 5.) Reprinted with permission of artist.

Locke, Silverman, and Spirduso (2010) note that data displays are often compact; certainly, the circle Collins has created accomplishes a taut visual. It appears deceptively simple. Essentially, it is a circular continuum, instead of something linear or hierarchal, and Collins feels the terms help define the various forms of art making that address environmental concerns. It is critical to note that the model acts like a Venn diagram to accommodate overlap and what Collins calls the

interstitial space for example between critical engagement and transformative action, or at the centre touching all three which is where one might place Joseph Beuys' *7000 Oaks Action*.

In looking at the practice of various eco-artists, I found it helpful to use this diagram by Collins and Reiko as a way to describe the intent and focus of eco-art work. For example, if one were to compare Agnes Denes' *Wheatfield* (Figure 3) and Andy Goldsworthy's *Balanced Rock Misty* (Figure 26), there could be discussion as to how each piece displays lyrical expression and/or critical engagement. Collins describes how much of land art is lyrical expression and that critical engagement has been a common accepted area of practice, but the growing body of work that he calls transformative action is the least understood in terms of an art form. He states that one mode is not considered more important than another but I agree that transformative action is intriguing as an active area of growth in the genre of eco-art, as artists do indeed respond in different ways to a variety of environmental concerns in society.

Finding common ground for defining eco-art has not yet addressed the fact that the term itself remains somewhat unsatisfactory.

Synonyms.

I have tried to come to terms with using the term eco-art, but after several years I still find I am in conflict with its overtones of a marketing trend. It should be remembered that the term eco-art is an abbreviated form of ecological art. The "eco" prefix, unfortunately, is currently an overused label in marketing anything "green" that supposedly doesn't harm the environment. Weintraub (2012) makes the observation that while other disciplines that embrace and acknowledge a primary view of connectivity to the environment refer to terms such as human ecology, urban ecology, or social ecology, there is not an art ecology (p. 7). There are other terms available; for example, the concept of place-based education creates the possibility of a term like "place-based art," which may be helpful as the underlying philosophy embraces both natural and cultural environments. Other

terms that might be used, and are already in use by some, are “sustainable art” or “systems art” (Fowkes & Fowkes, 2012). Weintraub (2013), in her textbook on the subject of eco-art, admitted that the eco-art movement cannot agree on the language and she could find no features to distinguish between the terms “environmental art” and “eco-art.”

That said, I have to concede that when I search eco-art online, I generally find what I am looking for; thus, the terms eco-art and eco-art education function well enough for the purpose of this research. When referencing art from Europe or to provide relief from repetition, I may use other terms at times. It is therefore important to note that synonyms for similar work include land art, environmental art, site-specific art, earth art, ecological art, and a case could be made for place-based art or sustainable art as well. In particular, it should also be noted that if you are searching this type of work by artists from Europe, better success will be had using the term *land art*. Similarly, one can refer to artists in the same way: eco-artist, land artist, environmental artist, site-specific artist, earth artist, ecological artist.

For me, when I am asked the question, ‘What is eco-art?’, I will often say it is easier to frame it by the intent and the values it is based on than by any specific technique or material. To flesh out this idea, I have found Rosenthal’s model of the seven values present in eco-arts projects useful in conceptualizing eco-art. Rosenthal (2003) decided that foundational values define what is considered eco-art—values that focus on land ethic, systems thinking, sustainability, social and biological diversity, social and environmental justice, collaboration, and integrity. These are described as follows:

- i. Land Ethic: Recognizing that we are members of an interdependent “community” that includes not only humans but the whole of the natural world

- ii. Systems Thinking: Visualizing patterns and relationships across disparate information and knowledge systems, and applying the lessons of ecosystems to our human communities (Capra, 1996).
- iii. Sustainability: Designing our lives, work, products, social systems and relationships to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. (World Commission on Environment and Development as cited in Collins, 2003, p. 15)
- iv. Social and Biological Diversity: Understanding that diversity among disciplines, cultures and species is a prerequisite for systems' health and resilience.
- v. Social and Environmental Justice: Insisting that all species have a right to a clean environment that supports their health and the ecological systems that sustain life.
- vi. Collaboration: Bridging the boundaries between disciplines, cultures, classes, genders, communities and species, respecting what each brings to designing solutions that work for everyone.
- vii. Integrity: Closing the gap between what we value and how we act in the world.

Works of art and the practice of artists tend to slip and escape out of charts and models, but it is a useful exercise to try and place works within these models; it is also helpful to have specific references when explaining to people what eco-art practice and projects might look like. Within Rosenthal's seven values, we can observe that the terms land art, systems art, and sustainable art each fit with the first three values she mentions. Such examples of definitions and models contribute to our ability to discuss eco-art in an educational setting. From the definitions just described, one can see that there are many aspects to eco-art. Values of sustainability and integrity have the most relevance to my personal project.

Weintraub (2012) has a very thorough and comprehensive model with which to look at eco-art. She has created a square schematic and on each side of the square she addresses an aspect of eco-art. The following points indicate the areas each side of the diagram lists. She cleverly surrounds each artist in her book with the four-sided schematic bolding the terms that apply to the work she is describing. One might also keep in mind that she refers to specific artworks since work by the same artist might be considered sculpture or performance and they might be concerned with waste in one and habitat in another. The four areas she considered are:

- i) Eco Issues: energy, waste, climate change, technology, habitat, sustainability, resources, chaos/complexity, systems, reforms
- ii) Eco Approaches: conservation, preservation, social ecology, deep ecology, restoration ecology, urban ecology, industrial ecology, human ecology, ecosystem ecology, sustainable development
- iii) Art Genres: paint/print, sculpture, performance, photo/video, bio art, generative art, social practice, digital art, installation, public art, design
- iv) Art Strategies: instruct, intervene, visualize, metaphorize, activate, celebrate, perturb, dramatize, satirize, investigate.

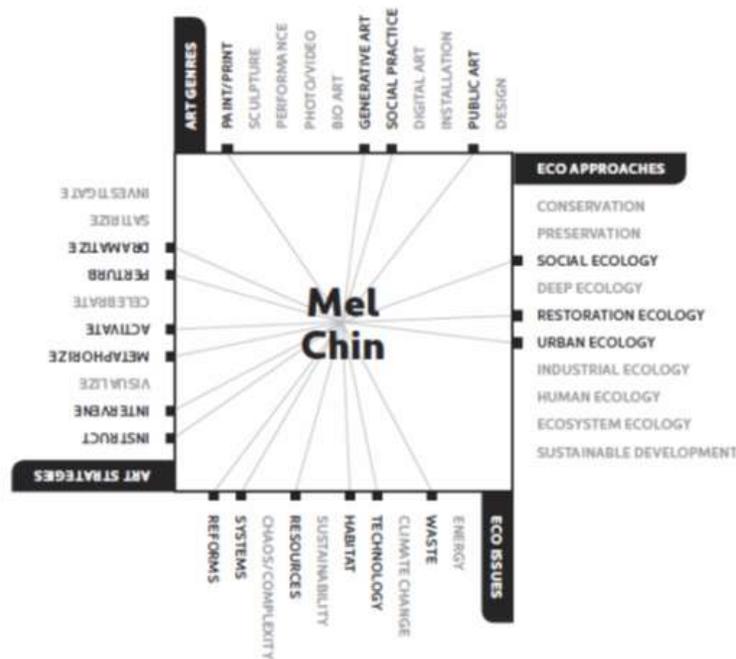


Figure 6. Example of the schematic showing eco-artist’s genre, approach, strategy, and identified issues (Weintraub, 2012, p.135. Reprinted with permission.

Throughout my research project, questions about the ephemeral quality of eco-art became paramount as did issues of place, restorative aspects, and an overall concern for our relationship with nature. Collaborative and community-based art projects that address ecological balance are fascinating case studies that perhaps do more than anything to help anyone new to the area define eco-art.

Considering the strong connection of eco-art to place, and my interest in education, it is requisite to next address place-based education.

Eco-art and Place-based Education

I began using the term “site-specific art” in 2010, and in 2012 I played around with the term “place-based art” in titles and in talking about the type of work I was exploring. Although I did not

set out to place eco-art under the umbrella of place-based education, I would run across the assertion throughout the literature that eco-art was a good fit with place-based education (Garoian, 1998; Gradle, 2007; Graham, 2007; Inwood, 2009; Song, 2009). The idea that place-based learning provides a theoretical framework to support eco-art education has been around for over fifteen years (Inwood, 2009). Garoian (1998) refers to “an art education of place” (p. 260) and describes a lesson where he promotes what he calls a metaphor for art education, an ecological pedagogy that critiques the stereotype of landscape painting and promotes a less analytical relationship to the environment through art lessons that promote representations of the environment that are compassionate and show caring. His example of a lesson in which he asked students to bring in a container of soil collected locally, dump it on paper and create drawings with it, had echoes of my own efforts to try an approach to art making that was relevant to developing ecological consciousness.

Although I have been less concerned with representations of the environment, I have attempted eco-art projects with students with the intent that it might create a moment, however brief, when they connected with the natural site in which the art was made. Studying the work of eco-artists reinforced the idea that art has the ability to bring attention to local ecology and even mitigate local ecological issues. This type of art making fits even more precisely with critical place-based pedagogy where the theoretical framework combines the ecological focus of place-based education and the social focus of critical theory (Gruenewald as cited in Graham, 2007). Ecological politics is not something that eco-artists avoid. Graham (2007) also comments that critical place-based pedagogy can “cultivate a sense of wonder toward the places we inhabit, an awareness of the cultural and ideological forces that threaten them, and the motivation to take action” (p. 388). Thus, place-based theory supports aspects of the eco-art practices that will be described later in this thesis. Inwood (2010) points out that, in the end, defining eco-art is really not as important as getting out,

or getting your students out, and doing the creative work. Indeed, her comment is paramount to my research; I explored eco-art by getting out and doing the work.

SECTION TWO

The Exploring Begins: Finding an Eco-art Practice

I am convinced now, as I suspected then, that making art makes me a better researcher. Making research makes me a better artist. (Cutcher, 2008, p. 30).

I began my exploration of eco-art as a teacher does, by teaching it. Initially, I was drawn to trying out eco-art in my teaching practice because I felt my art class could use a jolt of integrity, meaning that the art projects reflect an environmental ethic. As a starting point, I made up criteria for these early eco-art projects: I decided projects must be outdoors, use only materials found on site, tools must not be used to make the project, and the projects should break down easily. The intent was to be more mindful and aware of what the place was 'made of'; the art projects were not to generate any waste and they should naturally decay. I used the well-known Scottish artist Andy Goldsworthy's model of going out and creating some simple forms with natural materials found at hand. I came to think of it as sandcastle building in the forest. We did not have a shore to play on but there is a scraggly bit of boreal forest behind the Gallery where I work and this became the outdoor art class. Soon after, the beginnings of my research project germinated as part of an assignment in my first course in the MEd program when I felt that trying out an eco-art project of my own would inform and give integrity to any further research I did, as well as enhance my teaching. I was committed to learning in practice as well as in theory. I wanted to try art making consistent with ecological values that would provide a knowing through the experience and keep me grounded in a creative process. I needed to get my hands into the work, get outdoors, and become more aware and connected to the outdoor space where I planned on doing the work.

I tried out various eco-art projects modelled again on the working style of Andy Goldsworthy, who describes his work as land art. Many of his pieces over the last thirty years have used materials directly connected to the place in which the piece is constructed. He has created work with a myriad of natural materials, including dandelion heads, driftwood, ice, coloured leaves,

and stones. Unconsciously, I found myself immersed in the process of arts-informed research that redefines research through infusing both processes and forms from the visual arts with expansive possibilities of scholarly inquiry for the purpose of advancing knowledge (Knowles & Cole, 2008). Barone and Eisner (2012) point out that making art and interpreting it are the basis for constructing theories of artistic knowing. They suspect that we do not always need to be borrowing research methods from other fields: why exclude, or consider invalid, art making as a research process? If it is research connected to art education, why not use art making as an instrument for the research?

I began using found materials at the beach and in the forest to create some work. I was excited but also skeptical as to whether I could consistently engage in some creative work through the rest of the MEd program. Two more courses and six months later, I was back on the beach, not a sand beach but a rocky shoreline, with a bucket of clay that had just been dug from the bottom of the lake. I tried several different processes that afternoon and completed a few attempts at creating something in the eco-art genre. It was very pleasant, warm and sunny on the shores of Lake Superior and, though I made nothing worth noting, it was an important day because of the use of clay. For me, the project had begun - I had found the material and would soon find that painting with the clay would be my technique. Exploring eco-art through process, being active in an embodied and skilled way created the basis for my project.

Well known art educator and scholar Eliot Eisner (2009) says that an aesthetic experience, that is, an artistic visual experience, should *do something* for us. He asks the audience to think of the opposite of aesthetic, prompting that it could be 'anesthetic' and noting that an anesthetic puts us to sleep. In contrast, what can an aesthetic experience do for us? I agree with Eisner: it can wake us up. Even just a bit, for just a little while, art can do that and I have found that art making can do that as well. The idea that doing art can improve the research and conversely doing research can improve art has a growing resonance (Cutcher, 2008; Finley & Knowles, 1995).

Research Methods and Methodology

To infuse the arts into enquiry is to break out of conventional ways of researching. It is to be inspired by the arts, with regard to process and representation . . . To do this work is to act as a visual artist, poet, painter, photographer, dancer, dramatist, performer and so on. Process is informed not only by bringing to bear one's creativity given the art form, but by knowing how artists work. It is about fusing into one's scholarship the inspiration of an art and its processes and representations . . . How does an artist work? . . . The answer partially reveals the heart of what it means to do arts related research. (Knowles & Promislow, 2008, p. 5)

Research Questions

The study was exploratory in nature. According to Cresswell (2009), this is one of the chief reasons to choose a qualitative research method. Biggs (2008) notes that although a research question is necessary, it can also be framed as a theme or focus. With that in mind, my focus was the genre of eco-art and my research questions were: What themes emerge from the experience of an eco-art practice that contribute to the understanding of eco-art and eco-art pedagogy? What themes emerge from the study of the work of contemporary eco-artists? The sub-questions included: i) How is eco-art defined by academics, artists and educators? ii) What insights are gathered through the experience of searching for, discovering, and practicing a form of eco-art? iii) What are the implications for an eco-art pedagogy? I sought to build an understanding of the concept of eco-art through studying the literature, the artworks, and through my own experience of seeking an eco-arts practice. The latter leads me to describe the method and the methodology as phenomenological (Locke et al, 2010).

Phenomenology and Arts-informed Research

I took a phenomenological, arts-informed approach to my research. A phenomenological arts-informed study is a method of qualitative research that offered me a vehicle with which to conduct an original investigation into the topic of eco-art. I chose this method as a way of showing (rather than only telling) and of investigating first hand. Through narrative inquiry into personal reflection on my own practice, I sought to advance the phenomenon of eco-arts practice. According

to Locke et al (2010) and Creswell (2009), phenomenological studies are often both the method and the methodology. Phenomenology may be used to examine the meaning of a process from the vantage point of someone who experiences that phenomenon. Meaning is constructed through experience and, in this case, through my experience as a researcher practicing eco-art on the shores of Lake Superior over a period of two years. The mantra of phenomenology is “a return to lived experience” (Kozel, 2013). Further, phenomenology addresses what Kozel (2013) calls the unhelpful divides, including theory and practice, and mind and body, and explains that early phenomenologists did not ground their practice in creative processes but did leave the door open for others to do so.

The other facet of my method is known as arts-informed inquiry (Cole & Knowles, 2008). There are other terms associated with research using a creative practice, including: arts-based, arts-integrated, practice-led, practice-based, process-led, studio-based, practice as research, research by design, and artistic research. All of these terms refer to types of research that involve the arts (Biggs, 2008). My work best aligns with arts-informed inquiry as research that uses a qualitative, accessible, reflexive enquiry method. Cole and Knowles (2008) have written extensively about arts-informed research, describing it as a method that recognizes “multiple aspects of being human, the physical, emotional, spiritual, social, cultural and myriad ways of engaging in the world – oral, literal, visual, embodied” (p. 60). The types of research best served by arts-informed inquiry are those that are exploring, analysing, or representing individuals’ experiences or understandings about complex ambiguous phenomena or concepts – the “liminal” spaces and places (Ewing, 2011). Eisner confirms that arts-informed research “highlights, and in fact often celebrates, the personal and the particular” (cited in Ewing, 2011, pp. 133-134). Eisner also states that the researcher can be the lens through which the research is undertaken; in this way, self-study is often linked with arts-informed research. Certainly, this thesis aligns with these views.

My research grows from the *practice* of eco-art. Working in a public art gallery and regularly having conversations with artists, I can say artists generally refer to “making art” and not to their “practice.” I use the term practice to denote the regular, ongoing exercise of creative work. Sullivan (2006) reasons that, “Art practice is a creative and critical form of human engagement that can be conceptualized as research” (p. 134). Picasso said, “I never made a painting as a form of art, it’s all research” (cited in McNiff, 2008, p. 29). The art making process is increasingly accepted in qualitative ethnographic, narrative, and phenomenological research in the social sciences, psychology, and education (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008 cited in Rolling, 2010; Leavy, 2009; McNiff, 2008; Marshall & D’Adamo, 2011). The notion that art practice can generate knowledge was first suggested in the 1970s by Eisner (D’Adamo, 2011) and was later also supported by Barone (2006), Rolling (2010), and Sullivan (2006).

Nimkulrat (2012) states that since the 1990s, practitioners’ creative practices have been vehicles of theoretical inquiry and subjects for scholarly research. In her definition, the target of reflection is the artifacts that are produced whereas my primary focus is on the process itself, and the ideas that emerge because of that engagement. The objects that result from my study are important but secondary to the larger purpose of bringing integrity to the development of methods to present eco-art in educational and community settings. Nimkulrat’s own craft practice is the main method for her *design* research, whereas for my purposes, I developed my own eco-arts practice as the main method for *art education* research. The work I carried out was the subject *and* the vehicle for theoretical enquiry. I like Nimkulrat’s (2012) expression “thinking through material” (n.p.) which, for me, meant thinking through a dynamic creative process using natural materials to grow understanding and learning.

D’Adamo (2012) deals with a distinction between art in research and art as research but she argues that both are grounded in the notion that art making is “a form of inquiry, a kind of open-ended, artist/researcher-driven learning process in which new knowledge is discovered or

constructed” (p. 12). Further she states that, “Re-framing art practice as research represents a paradigmatic shift in the way we understand research, art, and artists” (p. 12). Later in the thesis I describe how I engaged in an eco-arts practice using narrative and photographs. The process facilitated reflection and then articulation of knowledge generated from within an artistic experience. Arts-informed inquiry was thus a good match for my research as it provided an opportunity to approach the material (eco-art) not only in study but also by physical immersion with the subject matter, taking what is being studied and considering theories and concepts of eco-art during two years of experiential inquiry.

Action research methodology also can be linked and fits with my arts-informed research in that action research has an unfolding and emergent nature of inquiry. Also characteristic of action research is a practical aspect in that the research helps in an approach to a pedagogy connected to eco-art. *Artography* (Irwin, 2006) also has some resonance as a theoretical base for my method. *Artography* is defined by Irwin as a living practice of art, research, and teaching that encourages educators/artists to merge the professional and personal in living their work. While I found Irwin’s writing and work inspiring, my approach involves exploration of the subject through the phenomena of art making and thus I found the term “phenomenological arts-informed research” was the best fit.

According to Graham (2007), contemporary artists raise provocative questions about nature and culture that reflect complexities in our relationship with the natural world. As I worked through the reflections on my own practice, I refer to artists who are established, are connected to place, are making work with a restorative attitude in mind, and making work that displays ephemerality and a lyrical quality. In the work of these artists, I found inspiration. I also looked at qualities and themes and considered how the work fit into models of eco-art and, further, how it fit into an eco-art pedagogy of place. Accountability is addressed in part by the fact that the artists I refer to are established and I trust the integrity of their art and practice; each work was, in essence, a mini case

study of eco-art. Looking at their work, the form and concept, I considered fundamental characteristics and underlying philosophies that drive the practice of eco-art.

Data Collection and Analysis

Fry says that research begins in analysis and ends in story (cited in Sullivan, 2006, p. 20). There are two overarching sources of “data” for my research: my personal eco-art practice and the study and stories of contemporary eco-artists and eco-art works. The search for an eco-arts practice gave me moments of discovery and of attention to place; adding some documentation of these through photography. The intent was to generate clarity about eco-art by practicing a form of eco-art and reflecting critically on those experiences in light of previous research (e.g., Collins, 2003; Rosenthal, 2003; Inwood, 2009, 2010). My methodological approach made this knowledge accessible through the use of writing narratives and through documenting visually through photographs.

Data for my phenomenological arts-informed research project was collected over a two year period on the shorelines of three islands in Lake Superior. The data produced took three forms: text, rocks, and photographs. The subject was approached from different angles simultaneously: from the journey of a personal practice, from engagement with theoretical research, and observation and study of my eco-art works. Waters (2013) points out that in phenomenological research, if you are gathering data from participants you would want to be as “non-directive” as possible without guiding the reflections to control and colour the recorded experience. Similarly, my reflections on the practice came directly from the experience itself and were not guided by a series of set questions.

The experience, the reflection, and further interpretation were all used for analysis. Mills (2003, cited in Inwood, 2009) used a model for qualitative research that had three components: experiencing, inquiring, and examining. The inquiring aspect relates to the initial research questions and examining to the probing of what comes during the research. An emergent strategy is allowed in that patterns and themes are drawn out of the experience and narrative data. Barone (2011) also

supports the use of narrative, storytelling, and metaphor as a part of gathering and analyzing data as well as the presentation of research findings. I was looking to get at some essential meaning by finding persistent elements of the experience, paying attention to moments of discovery. In my practice, this meant repeating the exercise of creative work many times and also revisiting the work of eco-artists, the reflections, and the photographs to find themes. By doing so, the process of first-hand research resulted in an in-depth analysis with which to address the research question.

It is reasonable to question whether one is qualified to act as an artist, to presume to do research through an art-making process. With many visual arts courses on my transcript and many years working as an art educator, I am familiar with working through the techniques of many visual art forms. Committing to a practice of focused creative work on a regular basis has occurred sporadically throughout my life, but during the carrying out of this inquiry, I did the work, consistently over a period of time. Through persistent, regular creative practice, one gains certain insights. My background made me suited to embark on arts-informed research, particular by means of an eco-art practice. First and foremost, I value exploring environmental ethics and, second, I have a background in arts techniques, explored over twenty years and a teaching background of the same length. The triangle of environmental values, creative art practice, and a teaching practice inform each other and created a solid framework in which to situate this research project.

The research questions were addressed in relation to my journey with an eco-art practice. The resulting analysis was written up under six headings with photographs. Probing the genre through personal practice involved investigation, inquiry, and examination over time. Reflexivity in research does not hide the presence of the researcher, rather, as de Freitas (2008) suggests, “Reflexive researchers front their signature in the texts they create, evoking a feeling of immediacy and self-presence” (p. 471). de Freitas maintains that this is a statement about the connected nature of knowledge as well as a political statement about the “non-innocence” of research. Reflexive writing practices dispute the positivist claim that researchers should maintain an objective distance

between subject and object. In the third section of the thesis, the tone of the musings on the topic of eco-art reflects such reflexivity.

McNiff (2008), writing from his own experience with arts-based educational research, communicates ideas about methodology that I also found in the experience of practicing arts-informed research:

My experience consistently reinforced the importance of establishing a relatively simple and consistent methodology for artistic inquiry. The simpler the deeper I say as a guiding principle and this direction is consistent with the way in which science attempts to place controls on variables. Since artistic expression is essentially heuristic, introspective and deeply personal, there needs to be a complementary focus in art-based research on how the work can be of use to others and how it connects to practices in the discipline. (p. 34)

I sought to connect findings that would inform an approach towards eco-art and its potential use in educational settings such as art galleries, museums, and classrooms in elementary and high schools, colleges, and universities.

SECTION THREE

Analysis and Synthesis: Musings from a practice of eco-art in six themes

Introduction

Steinbeck once said, “Let’s go wide open. Let’s see what we see, record what we find, and not fool ourselves with conventional scientific stricture.” (cited in Neilsen, 2004, p. 52)

Following the emergent nature of qualitative research in general, the creative inquiry process of arts-informed is defined by an openness to the expansive possibilities of the human imagination. (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 61)

I am calling the pulling apart and putting back together that constitutes analysis and synthesis “musings.” Eisner and Barone (2012) offer ten fundamental ideas about arts based research, including “the purpose is to raise significant questions and engender conversations rather than to proffer final meanings” (p. 166). To “muse” may sound uncertain, but it is not; rather, musing is a product of contemplation, of thought. To muse is “to ponder, to reflect,” according to the Canadian Oxford Dictionary or “to think about something carefully or thoroughly . . . a state of deep thought or dreamy abstraction” (Merriam Dictionary online, 2014). This latter reference to dreamy abstraction made me smile, but it was while reading Bing’s Dictionary definition of musings that I laughed out loud: “thoughts, especially when aimless and unsystematic” (Bing Dictionary online, 2014). A thesis provides generous opportunity to think long and hard about something, so much so that one can get lost in the maze of ideas that emerge. However, it then provides the time to find the highlights and make sense of the journey and those mind meanderings.

Many themes emerged during the study and I began by clustering them into groups with a similar focus. To ensure reasonable scope, I further narrowed my insights to six themes based on how unexpected they were and how they might contribute to the discussion of eco-art pedagogy. Each musing is stated, along with its context and implications for education. Groenewald (2004) describes the process of finding themes, of having to elicit the “essence of meaning within the holistic context” (p. 19) and he describes how it calls for even judgement and insight on the part of

the researcher, something that is at times ineffable. What follows, then, are six musings that have arisen from the experience of doing, from the experience of having a practice of eco-art.

All journeys wander a little, but my musings are purposefully presented in the following order: i) *The Potency of Place* helps the reader physically situate where the eco-art practice occurred, and understand the impact and importance of place to the work of eco-artists in general; ii) *Being Alone*; the element of being in solitude while engaging in a practice of eco-art proves important for providing opportunity for a connection to the place in which the work is done; iii) *The Outdoor Studio*; eco-art most often occurs and is presented in outdoor spaces, although it is no longer as imperative as it was originally thought to be; iv) *A Sense of Adventure*, leads to a sense of experimentation, and characteristic of much of art making, this appeals to me and is predicted to be of value to eco-art education; v) *Ephemerality and Other Aesthetic Qualities* emerge and imply there is room for discussion surrounding the language we use to discuss art works; and vi) *Restoration and Atonement*, possibly the most important theme I discovered, suggests a place of hope that creative eco-art projects often address in pragmatic ways by exploring environmental problems and challenges to living in a sustainable way. And so we begin the pulling apart and putting back together of this phenomenological arts-informed research project.

i) At the Shore: The Potency of Place

In connection to his sculpture, *Combs of the Wind* artist Eduardo Chillida said “This place is the origin of all. . . . It is the true author of these works. I discovered it and then paid an homage to it” (cited in Stiles & Selz Eds, 1986, p. 509). Eco-art practices and projects are tightly knit with the place in which the making occurs; sometimes the place is an active participant. Chillida’s quote also conveys reverence and respect. I include in the notion of place, then, respect for all forms that inhabit it. I found that physical places have a powerful influence on, and act as inspiration for,

the work of eco-artists. My own project was no exception, but in the beginning, I was not aware of this and did not appreciate the potency of place.

Finding a place.

We had a scraggly bit of boreal forest behind the Gallery where I work and I began to think of the kind of eco-art I was teaching as “sandcastle building in the forest.” And so began my reference to a shore, although I did not find the shore or a practice easily. Early in my search for an eco-art practice the “place” in which I created something simply needed to be outdoors. I had set four rules to follow and one of them was to work outdoors, which meant that as long as I walked out the door, it did not really matter where I ended up. It could be a park, the backyard, the woods, a riverbank. Technique and material could vary each time. I could work with branches, coloured leaves, stones, grasses, or whatever else I found. The video *Rivers and Tides* (Riedelshamer, 2003) about artist Andy Goldsworthy illustrates this kind of artistic practice, one that Goldsworthy has carried out for over three decades. Although I enjoyed the surprise of not knowing what I might find or do when I went out, it was not satisfactory and I came to realize that this had to do with place.

Goldsworthy, who has been asked to create his style of land art around the world, responds to different places, but for much of his artwork he has delved deeply into one place, his hometown in Scotland, and, in particular, he has created many different works at the bottom of one particular tree. From this observation, I concluded that the same place can indeed be the site of a lot of creative work. It is not uncommon for artists of many mediums to return to the same subject matter and it turns out that for this research project, I liked returning to familiar territory as well. For my purposes of an ongoing eco-art practice, the place also needed to be convenient, and have a certain degree of privacy and wildness.

In 2011 and 2012, as an art educator, I guided individuals and groups of students through a process of finding their place in which to create, and I found the issue of privacy varied. A few did

not mind being in full view of the public, young children seemed oblivious to privacy, while most others preferred some degree of privacy as they worked out their ideas. Working outdoors makes one more exposed, and creating a feeling of privacy is more complicated than shutting the studio door or having your own desk space to work on. I decided that, for me, a backyard would achieve what was needed. With the complication, burden, but also privilege, of two homes; one in town and one in a remote location, I had two backyards to choose from. The latter, located on a large freshwater lake amongst an archipelago of islands offered the most promise of privacy.

Late one day, in the summer of 2011, I returned to our dock after an afternoon of paddling out to a beach on a distant island where I had been trying out some ideas for eco-art projects. After trying various approaches, I was not settled on any one technique, but I had found one thing with promise: using clay dug from the bottom of the lake. I was pleased about finding clay because it was part of the place, and is so adaptable: it could be used in a sculptural way or as a kind of glue or as paint. The latter was an interesting idea and my daughter and I mixed it with water and then worked with it on the rocks. It was an unpleasant experience, however, our fingers catching and dragging over the rough surface. When I returned to our small stretch of shoreline, I grabbed a paintbrush and returned to the dock. There it occurred to me that as a place, it felt safe, with only a short walk up the trail to the house and from the dock I had only to step off to the left or right to have a rocky shoreline on which to work. I could hear, see, and smell the water and I liked being on rocks – the cleanness of them, the feel of sun-warmed ones and their variety of sizes and shapes. The curving shoreline around the small bay offered space and scope for my purpose; it was private and still wild. The large lake and some distant islands were at my back. There was a spacious and yet protected feeling and, even more importantly, it was convenient, enabling me to get there and do the work on a regular basis.

One's own backyard is a perfect starting place for eco-art and mine just happened to include a stretch of shoreline. Simultaneously, I had found the technique of painting with clay on rocks;

Figure 7 below was the very time which I am describing. Using no tools, therefore, was the first of my four rules to go. The three left were that the work must be ephemeral, that I must use materials on site, and that the work must be done outdoors. Happily, I had found two important things: a technique and a place to do the work. My decision was made; this was it, this is where I would come to *do* something about the kind of work that I was studying. Here was the place where marks would be made and would disappear; here is where I became engrossed and absorbed by a shoreline ripe with possibility for my purposes; here is where thoughts of writing were set to the back burner and a pleasant attachment to a place and creative practice occurred; here is where the topic of eco-art rolled in like the waves and really stuck. It felt better, it felt like catching something instead of laboriously digging – albeit digging is necessary as in researching, reading, writing. Here at a shoreline there was listening to what soft summer waves had to say. Many mornings there was barely a ripple, in which case the sun had something to say and the rocks always had my full attention. I was about to gain that feeling of familiarity – I painted several rocks twice over and I seated myself in the same comfortable spots over and over. Sometimes I put a rock on the dock but that felt like cheating. I had lifted the rock out of context and I needed to be on the shoreline. I approached this with wonder: is this really where research had led me ... right back here?



Figure 7. Summer, 2011. I found my place at the shoreline; this was the first rock I painted with a brush and the clay. My eco-art practice began at this very moment.

Eco-artists and place.

The role of place is inseparable from the work of many eco-artists and what follows is a list of artists and a brief description of the connection between their work and the place in which they carried out their projects. The artists mentioned below do not go back to their studios to respond to a place, they dive into the place where the concern is for them. Telling the stories of these artists has potential in educational settings and I mention them to indicate that whether the work is done with the intent being “transformative action” or “lyrical expression” or “critical engagement” (Collins & Reiko, 2003) or a combination of these, the point is that physical place is critical and the works of these artists make creative action seem possible.

- Andy Goldsworthy responds to place in the materials he chooses, and in a very immediate way. “It’s never the object I make that has been of interest, but how it taps into the things that flow through a place and change a place. It’s a window into the processes that make that place what it is” (Goldsworthy, in Riedeslheimer’s *Rivers and Tides*, 2003). Goldsworthy is also influenced by time of year and weather in the making of his work, admitting to being thrown off by a change in the weather. Thus, the artwork itself is immensely dependent on a place in time and the specific conditions of that place. Some labels attached to Goldsworthy’s work reflect this place and time dependence. Most artwork labelling includes the artist name, date, and location but his at times have also included the weather at the time the piece was made. Even with his very early works, this was the case, one label reading “*Rock misty. 1977.*” Later on, there was even more detail: “*Black river, hard sand long hot day becoming cloudy, Galisteo, New Mexico, July 1999.*”
- As a scuba diver, artist, Jason de Caires Taylor was familiar with the underwater world in which he planned to place his sculptures, but he also had to consider very

carefully the exact location and placement for his underwater sculptures as the intention was that they would become coral reef.

- Lynne Hull found the place in which to place her series of nesting sites based on input from biologists. Place and location were critical to the “success” of her art works since the intention was that they would be used by birds.
- Robert Smithson wanted place to be part of his work, *Spiral Jetty*. He wanted the interaction with natural forces to factor into it over time and had no wish to interfere once they took over. Describing his plans for the large scale public earth work, he said, “At that point I was still not sure what shape my work of art would take. ... in the end I would let the site determine what I would build” (cited in Stiles & Selz 1996, p. 531). It is worth noting again that Smithson was criticized for his treatment of the land and water to create his earth work. Further reading showed that Smithson was very articulate and even poetic about his intent and the heavy machinery is only half the story about his attitude to place as he wanted to share the space and the work with the forces of nature.
- Agnes Denes pioneered social activist art, when she asked a city to pay attention to where its food comes from. Her project involved growing wheat, harvesting, processing, and consuming the bread made from it, all right in the city of New York. She had to reclaim a small piece of neglected land within the city to begin.
- In 2010, Canadian artist Nicole Fournier held a series of picnics as part of her performance, social practice, and public art work, *Live Dining Project*. She was also making a statement about where food comes from.
- Mierle Liederman is another pioneer in the eco-art field, doing social activist work. *Honouring Maintenance* (1969) was the first of several projects intended to get New York residents to notice the people who handled their waste. She wondered how to

transform a place degraded by its residents' waste: "Placing myself in the sanitation department, where these questions never go away, is a way for me to keep myself in the real . . . the landfill . . . that is where I want to locate my work" (cited in Weintraub, 2012, p. 117).

- Garcia-Dory is an artist with a background in farming and a degree in rural sociology. He is well positioned to respond to land use issues in rural Spain and to deal with the complexities of human/nature interaction. He created a school for shepherds in response to the sham of planting shepherds on pastoral hillsides for the tourists to view. It is curious that people are drawn to nature and the pastoral lifestyle but only from a distance. Garcia felt the view should be authentic.

Looking at the work of these artists has me considering what could be done with my technique of clay and what a class of grade 12 biology students might come up with as a project to address and challenge issues in the places they live. Artworks can give voice where there is none, that is, people can choose what to speak out on and do so through a variety of ways or genres that would fall under the heading of eco-art: sculpture, installation, performance, video, social practice, or bio art. The approach can also vary as described in Weintraub's schema; the work can instruct, intervene, or celebrate, perturb, or dramatize.

During this project I was concerned with the idea of site-specific work, work that acknowledges the place in which it was made, and I had not yet considered bigger implications. My plan was simple and lightweight compared to the heavier lifting being done by many practicing eco-artists. My original four rules for a practice included using materials that were on site. I then looked to Rosenthal's six values that characterize eco-art. The clay I used came from the bottom of the lake where I was painting and the rocks were already there. Therefore, consideration of place and using materials of the place acceptably reflects the value of integrity.

Place and eco-art education

As an arts educator, I teach one particular lesson on eco-art where participants carry out a simple exercise of creating in the outdoors with whatever materials are available on site. I observed that the very act of finding a place to work is an important and enjoyable part for most participants. They attach themselves in some way to a very specific, small outdoor area. It might be because of a tree, a stump, a clump of moss, a clearing, a colour, a leaf, a bird nearby – a myriad of natural phenomena can draw one in. Each time, I found that this part of the assignment was significant to participants, whether they were adults, teens or children. In my own practice and in my eco-art education practice, spending time in a particular outdoor space is central to the experience.

Graham (2007) states that place-based education provides a robust framework for eco-art education; conversely, eco-art can prove to be a strong partner for place-based education. Eco-art education and practice has the capacity to connect students of all ages to places, whether it be in an intimate, immediate way or by increasing ecological knowledge about a place or intervening to improve some aspect of the environment. Similarly, the Orion Society defines place-based education as that which “emphasizes the connection of school, community, and environment. There is an appreciation for the natural world, and a commitment to citizen engagement” (retrieved from <http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/mag/5863/> Feb. 2014). Inwood (2008) describes eco-art education as education that re-connects art making and art education to issues and concerns of communities. Her video on eco-art (2013) traces eco-art projects done over several years at an elementary public school and traces the impact that the eco-art projects completed by the students had on their place, their school grounds. The concerns for places, wild as well as in peopled areas such as school grounds, are exemplified in the practices of many of the eco-artists described above.

Last thoughts on a place

The particular shorelines where my project was carried out was an interesting return for me – a reconciliation. A few weeks ago, a friend reminded me that I used to say, “Once upon a time, I

liked living out here because the place spoke to me – but we don’t speak anymore – I don’t hear anything, we’re not talking.” At the time I said it jokingly, but I came to realize there is some truth in it. One day we can feel such disconnect to a place and the next we find ourselves quite connected again to it, and in my case, featuring it prominently in a major project. How did this happen to me? It was partly because I happened to find an opportunity to be uniquely alone in this place, which has surprising prominence in my project. One musing leads to another and before the end of the project, I observed that there can be even further “potency of place” if you are *alone* in that place, the topic of the next musing.



Figure 8. Summer, 2012. Painting with clay on rocks at the shore. The plan was to go bigger and cover a stretch of shoreline. These represent the larger of the rocks that I painted on.

ii) **Being Alone**

“I like to see art as being a return to the senses.”(Long, 1991, p. 241)

You cannot define the final outcome when you are planning to do the work. In the creative process, the most meaningful insights often come by surprise, unexpectedly and even against the will of the creator. (McNiff, 2008, p. 40)

Of all my musings on the topic of eco-art and through the journey of an eco-art practice, the impacts of being alone proved the most unexpected. Like the pleasure of an unexpected guest – except that, in this case, the guest turned out to be a non-guest – solitude produced an aliveness in a

place that had previously been imperceptible. This “aliveness” came unexpectedly and demanded attention as a facet of creative practice and eco-art that I was experiencing.

Nearing the end of my project, I found myself staying out at the lake alone, continuing to spend time getting out to make marks on rocks, even though it was obvious at this stage that I should be focused on writing. By this time, each rock painting entailed a small outing in my kayak which added new insights and perspectives to my eco-art process. The following was pulled from my reflections one morning:

What surfaces this morning is that, much against my social nature, which I believe to be average, I have to concede that there is something to be gained from being alone to continue this creative practice and experiment with eco-art. Generally, I choose to do very little alone; I like to paint, travel, run, and walk in the company of someone. If I am reading on one end of the couch, I prefer that someone else be reading on the other end, and if I could, I actually think I would enjoy writing more if I could do it with someone. Collaboration and community-based work are important qualities to eco-art, and yet now I have to speak for the positive outcomes of spending time outdoors, engaged in a creative practice, alone. The irony does not escape me that not only do I prefer company and I left this isolated place on the shores of an immense lake in part because it felt lonely, but now I am back wondering why the solitude feels so good. Several times on my morning paint/paddles, beyond the wildlife encounters, I have witnessed what I can simply describe as a pulsating in the landscape.

I remember writing to a friend about this. Beverley is one of the few people who knows what I have been up to these last few months. The following e-mail exchange occurred on September 18, 2013:

Hi Beverley,

It is beautiful, I grudgingly admit - I have a like/dislike with autumn, it gets me slightly down with the thought of the long winter - you on the other hand embrace the time for hibernation.

I went out paddling for the last three days in a row –this morning was overcast, warm and dead calm and absolutely dreamy like. There is something about solitude that has been slightly alarming lately - surroundings seem to vibrate with life. . . .

Yesterday I had the pleasure of running into not one but two otters! What a boot - they snuffle and snort and they peered at me, like otters do - luckily they didn't seem too concerned about my presence and just swam past.

Hi, Vivian: Glad to hear that you were able to paddle that beautiful lake and meet the otters. An interesting observation, too, about surroundings seeming to vibrate with life – isn't that the same life that vibrates within us? Experiencing this, first in nature and then in ourselves until we actually experience the oneness that is Life is pretty much what the wisdom teachers throughout the centuries into our present day would have us be doing as our primary purpose. On a more mundane level, I washed windows on this beautiful almost autumn day and quite enjoyed the peacefulness, sunshine and fresh air, while doing a rather mindless task. I rather like how the cleanness of washed windows hits me when I look out, so rare are they clean, I suppose . . .

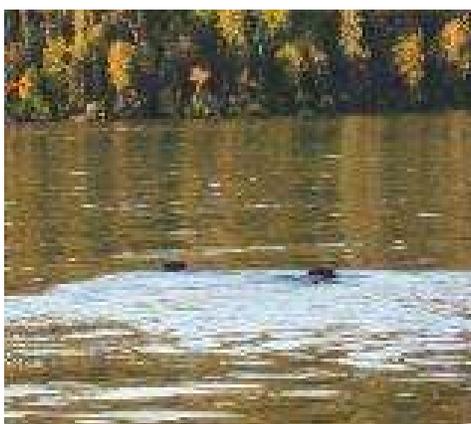


Figure 9. September 18, 2013. The two otters I encountered. Wildlife encounters were more frequent and meaningful when I was out alone.

The sporadic conversations Beverley and I had over this period were fun and at the same time valuable; she often pointed to the bigger picture in all of this. However, to focus on a creative practice of eco-art and the idea of being alone, I do not think it is too cliché or simplistic to include in my account of a practice of eco-art that in solitude, things may occur that do not happen in groups and that a creative practice can instigate or set the stage for such. Bai (2009) calls it reanimating the universe in her discussions of environmental education and I think that phrase succinctly describes what can happen. I respect the experiences I have been privileged to have through this research project and, though the activity may sound lonely, the experience felt anything but.



Figure 10. Sept 2013. This unaltered photo caught something of the ethereal quality I mentioned in the email. There is an extraordinary feature that is quite palpable when alone. I had set the camera up in a tree.

Koch (1994) makes a distinction in his book, *Solitude: a Philosophical Encounter*, saying that the defining feature of solitude is disengagement from other people and does not imply alienation, isolation, or loneliness. There is a memorable moment in *Rivers and Tides* (Riedesheimer, 2003) when Goldsworthy pauses and admits he finds people “rather draining.” In his particular artistic practice, solitude provides some of his artistic fuel. Koch (1994) contends that creative people often have a clear, articulated need for solitude. He describes the painter Georgia O’Keefe, known for her solitary retreats in New Mexico, as an example. Conversely, when I first looked at various eco-artists and their practices it was the idea of collaboration that was notable. Peter Von Teisenhausen’s river boats, a community art project, involved the engagement of one hundred

people who simply arrived to take part. Consider also Joseph Beuys and his *7000 Oaks* project, where many helped with the planting, Agnes Denes and her wheat field, Lynne Hull and her raptor nests created as habitat; each artist collaborated with many other people.

Reflecting upon the process of my own work, there are ways to include community, but at the time, it was not intended for an audience and was done alone. The flexibility within the world of art making allows for such a decision; we can embrace and acknowledge the variety of ways in which artists approach eco-art and not judge its credibility by whether the artists have collaborated; that is, we cannot say eco-art *should* involve collaboration. Having been involved in community arts practice at other times, I can say it is wonderful to do collaborative art work in a group context. Human interaction and social consciousness in art work is very creditable and needed, but flexibility is called for in arts education because students will not always embrace a collaborative art project, there will always be those who groan inside because they would rather just work alone, thank you. In short, if the intent of eco-art is to improve our relationship with nature, solitude may be helpful and we can acknowledge collaboration as a common feature, but not a defining or necessary feature of the practice. Furthermore, we need not judge the work on that basis. Perhaps, if there is any necessary collaboration in eco-art, it may well be in collaboration with nature.

Koch (1997) lists the virtues of solitude as: attunement to nature, freedom, attunement to self, reflective perspective, and creativity. Solitude benefited my experiment with a creative practice, and drew me to see Koch's attunement to nature: "Extraordinary connections to the natural world are formed in solitude, sensations more acute, more engrossing, more infused with passion than are usually possible among other people" (p. 117). The boundaries between self and nature at times dissolve in solitude, and eco-art can be "that art which improves our relationship with nature" (Greenmuseum, 2012, para 1). While facilitating an eco-art education experience to a group of high school students, I had them working on their own in a natural forested area. In theory they were having a somewhat solitary experience. However, on closer inspection of photographs I took while

the students were working, I noticed one of the participants had her head down in that unmistakable stance of reading text messages on her cell phone. When Koch wrote *Solitude*, social networking was virtually non-existent. Portable cellular devices do not mean we cannot have worthwhile experiences of solitude, but I wonder if they may be harder to come by now.

iii) **The Outdoor Studio**

In a lecture on November 9, 2010 to an environmental ethics class on the topic of place-sensitive education, Dr. Bob Jickling shared an anecdote that I will share with you now: An artist made a simple intervention: she (or he) switched two signs in an education building, the EXIT and ENTER signs, so that as you were leaving the building you were “entering” and as you were coming into the building you were “exiting.” This simple act puts a smile on our faces because we know the intrinsic truth of this; it is so unassuming and small and yet causes a profound shift in our perception about what is out and what is in. We smile because we know the artist has made a clever point. Although we spend so little time outdoors, it is really our entry point to the essential elements that sustain us. Wilson (1984) talks about ‘the biophilia hypothesis’, which states that human beings are innately attracted to nature, that biologically we are geared to immersion in it.

In talking of the potency of place and being alone in that place, and given my chosen practice, it might seem obvious that the outdoors element of eco-art is a necessity. For my own eco-art practice, it was an assumption that all the creative work would occur outdoors. And the place I felt students needed to connect to was not an indoor space; it was the wilder, more natural outdoor space. I appreciate the sentiment in Louv’s (2008) *Last Child in the Woods* that fed the “no child left inside” movement. Surely any eco-art done indoors was what Inwood (2010) would characterize as a “lighter shade of green.” Creative work occurring outdoors is practically synonymous with eco-art, isn’t it?

In most parts of Canada, taking up art making outdoors presents a whole new set of challenges and deterrents once winter sets in unless snow or ice is your chosen medium. I had

settled on clay and the change in season did deter me. Does this reflect a lack of hardiness and adventure on my part? In Canada, cold and snow need not stop one from being outdoors. I had to wear gloves, wrap the container of clay in newspaper, and add hot water to the clay. On carefully chosen days, winter work could be pleasant but I was not embracing the chill. After two efforts to work outdoors, I decided the practice either had to hibernate over winter or be taken indoors.



Figure 11. March 2013. Painting with clay outdoors on the same stretch of shoreline. Winter proved a deterrent for my outdoor creative practice. I tried working outdoors in winter only twice.

I thought it was important that I continue my practice over the winter, however, in autumn, rocks were hauled up from the shore, loaded in the car, and brought to Thunder Bay. There I painted on them in the evenings during computer screen breaks so that I could connect to the project in a different kind of doing. A collection began to grow in my small workroom and, much to my surprise and disappointment, I found that I enjoyed the process indoors. This caused me to question how adamant I am about the outdoors and what it is in human nature that causes us to be such comfort-loving creatures, sometimes to our own detriment. There is something lost in the indoors, but it was less perceptible than I imagined. I can only conjecture that, given a longer period of time or a different climate, I might not have brought the work indoors at all.

I had started with four rules for an eco-art practice and now this most basic element was being dropped. The fact was that there was still a lot of pleasure to be had working indoors on a rock that brought to mind a place and a pleasant outdoor experience. There was still some

resonance of the outdoor place from where the rocks came, but it reminds me of artists who bring landscape photographs into the studio. They spend eight hours working from the photo for every ten minutes spent outdoors getting the picture. Even though I am studying eco-art, even though the outdoors is still a vital part of the exercise, I have to admit that I enjoy working indoors, which was a surprise. This inconsistency between theoretical assumptions and lived experience surfaced and invigorated the research process for me.

Looking again to where my eco-art would land on Inwood's (2010) sliding scale, I might only earn a light green designation and I was not sure how being indoors even met the basic definition of eco-art, that which improves our relationship with nature. Nature (the clay and rocks, although removed and isolated from their context) was there, but the relationship had existed outdoors and could not have the same value indoors.

Scrolling through the practice of eco-artists that I have studied – Goldsworthy, Long, Beuys, Denes, Sonfist, Dicaires, Geddes – I am hard pressed to find an example of an artist who works indoors. Then I recalled that at the Gallery where I work, we had an exhibition three years ago that would qualify as eco-art. The sound and view of water video streamed from a local and gushing river was projected onto large turning umbrellas in the gallery. Students were invited to lie down as they watched and listened to the water. We played shadow games as we considered the value of water in our lives and the exhibit itself was an homage to water. Yet we were indoors, within gallery walls, and with some piece of the outdoors brought in for us to consider and experience as water. The exhibition was effective; it heightened our senses to the sound of water gushing through spring melt. As we lay there listening, I realized we would not have had this opportunity without the art installation – it being highly unlikely that we would have trekked out to the river and lain down on the river bank to listen.

This is a good point at which to pause and look again at the Collins and Reiko model (2003) of lyrical expression, critical engagement, and transformative action; the model does not mention the

outdoors. Rosenthal's (2003) six values for defining eco-art did not mention a necessity for being outdoors either. Perhaps they assumed that connection? Although I can relate to Wilson's (1984) biophilia hypothesis, there is the other side to consider: humans need immersion in nature, but they are drawn to indoor spaces and immersion in such places as shopping malls too. In fact, the outdoors could be a block for many teachers in trying out eco-art. If teachers resist going outdoors there are other ways to approach eco-art; there are many stories to tell and ways to tell them. Finding out that the outdoors was not an absolute, has enabled me to consider the implications of this for eco-art practice and eco-art education even as I maintain that the outdoors is extremely important, even central, to much in the eco-art field. My experience has led me to adjust my position, albeit slightly, in that being outdoors is no longer quite as critical as I had originally thought.



Figure 12. Winter 2012. Breaking the outdoor rule. Winter could have been a hibernation of my practice, but painting these rocks felt good. This image portrays my winter rocks, although the designs were often similar to my summer outdoor ones.

iv) Leaving the Shore: A Sense of Adventure

Another quality that at first appears to be an overlap to the outdoor factor is that of a sense of adventure. The phrase “sense of adventure” is a little clumsy, but after getting out regularly during the last stretch of painting on rocks, I realized that this might be one way to describe the quality I was experiencing. It had often puzzled me that I was caught up in this practice, actually enjoying it. Early on when I was teaching a form of eco-art, I developed a phrase to help learners approach the projects: “play that feels like work and work that feels like play.” Thus, I initially thought perhaps it was the notion of “play” that had me absorbed but this was not quite accurate.

I had been careful in choosing mark-making on rocks with clay as my practice, but still I thought it unlikely that I would be interested in continuing to create for as long as I did. Something was sticking and though I was nearing the end of my experiment I finally recognized that part of the reason was that there was a sense of adventure to the practice. Now, I had an explanation as to why such an unlikely thing had happened. I enjoyed not knowing exactly where I was going or what I would draw/paint.

Reflection

By the end of August 2013, there was an ever-growing need for respite from screen time, and the practice of working with clay on the rocks continued. There was a palpable tug between the demand to sit, think, and write and the seduction of a methodology that infuses art processes and depictions into research (Cole & Knowles, 2000, 2008). This conflict has been going on for months now. A stubborn refrain lingers in my head from many readings on arts-informed research which always goes along the lines of “move, paint, continue to gather thoughts while doing” – Cole and Knowles had written a hit song as far as I was concerned. The chair gets pushed back, the “log off” button is pressed, the screen lowered; the leaving begins here; in my mind, I change the words, the power is being switched on, not off, and I enter the world, and when I return and turn the computer on again, I am leaving, am I not?

It was by chance, the previous summer, that I tried paddling and painting. I had to take a visitor out paddling, but I was reluctant to miss my routine of painting a rock, and so I compromised. As an artist herself, a musician, she was pleasantly unconcerned with my request to wait while I stopped to find a rock and then paint it. I was grateful for her neutral attitude, for not finding this unusual, and for few words and no questions. In return, I tried not to hold up our paddle for too long so I painted from the kayak, which was a different experience again. From the kayak, I had access to larger rocks and I could only paint on part of their surface. It presented a new challenge to the aesthetics of the whole thing as well as requiring a different kind of patience as the boat moved a bit while I worked. Since that one chance visit, I made the decision to leave the comfort of my private, protected shoreline and regularly packed a small bag with clay, paintbrush, camera; the eco-art practice was suddenly extended to include paddling to nearby islands. Later on, I got out, pulled the boat up, and found rocks similar to those I found back at the dock.

There is a sense of adventure and open-mindedness that I enjoy about this aspect of research and this kind of art making. I enjoy wondering what will happen. I never know what is going to turn up on the rock, what I'm going to see while I am out there, on the shoreline or paddling. I never know where exactly I will work, but I am growing to recognize a pattern in the process and a confidence that indeed something will occur. I will feel better for it and I learn; some small nuance to the process presents itself most times I am out.



Figure 13. Paddling added a new dimension in the summer and fall of 2013. There were a number of shorelines I could paddle to with rock surfaces available to paint on.

A sense of adventure was not one of my necessary values of eco-art and yet it turned up in my practice as an additional benefit and a tangible aspect of the practice. Although images of kayaks imply a certain kind of adventure, what I mean by “adventure” in this instance is that I did not know what would happen each time I went out but I knew something would. It felt like purposeful exploration; attempts are often made by educators to try something new, something we have never done before, in the hopes that it will help our students. Trying out a practice was an adventure, and for some teachers simply taking students outside the building is just such a risk and an adventure. For students there would be a sense of adventure in trying a new kind of art making in the outdoors.

The Tree Museum in Muskoka, Ontario must have been an adventure for its curators. I visited this “museum” in the summer of 2011 and was very surprised by the format. An outdoor gallery for site-specific installations, some of the works are permanent and others are transitory, the elements determining how long they will be on exhibit. I was impressed by the number of participating artists and the lack of control in the setting. You must walk and you must find your way. The works are not announced; you find them. Part of their motto is to tread lightly on the land. At any given time, there are 10 to 15 works on site. As you hike your way through this “museum,” the sense of adventure is palpable and I guessed the name “museum” must be tongue-in-cheek. I climbed to quite a height as part of an installation high in the canopy of the forest – an unforgettable experience (see Figure 14). In my own practice I found a sense of adventure created an openness and deemphasized goal-oriented elements of my project.



Figure 14. Summer 2010. The Tree Museum in Muskoka, ON. This outdoor sculpture takes you into the tree canopy. This adventurous outdoor ‘gallery’ shook my understanding of what a gallery could look like and what an experience of eco-art could feel like.

Artists have a history of being risk takers. For example, against all odds, artist Alan Sonfist went ahead with his proposed piece, *Time Landscape* (1965). The project was to plant a small reserve of pre-colonial plant species in New York City. He was told it would not work, that the trees he planted in the middle of the city would not survive because they would be exposed to a different climate and so many other toxins and environmental factors that trees five hundred years ago would not have been exposed to. His vision was to have a living monument to ancient, indigenous plant species in New York. He must have felt excited and not without some trepidation about whether his experiment would even work. I see this as another aspect of science/art collaboration. Artists often will go where scientific logic might not. In this case, the unexpected did occur; Sonfist’s forest survived. Adventure: a bold, risky undertaking, when sometimes we just are not sure of the outcome; nothing is guaranteed but in the eco-art movement, artists are willing to try.

v) Ephemeral Qualities and Other Aesthetic Considerations:

Ephemerality: the rocks, the clay, the rain

The only rule I did not bend or drop during my experience and that I initially considered at the heart of any eco-art practice, was that of ephemerality. I had to feel confident that the work

would wash away and, early on, I did feel that confidence. However, as it turned out, I also had to change my views on ephemerality, and I discovered a whole other set of aesthetic characteristics that demanded consideration.

It has been a wet summer; everyone is talking about it. Just returned to the lake and went down to check on rocks painted last week. There have been several heavy rainfalls since then and although last year I had to accept that the clay lasted on the rocks much longer than anticipated, I thought torrential downpours might make the difference. Not so, the clay persists. Last year, I was frustrated by the slow fading of one particular rock and I took it to the university to have it identified by someone in the geology department. It turned out it was a certain type of sandstone and very porous, it might take years to fade. The work that I do must have an ephemeral quality, which by one definition I relate to states, "that which lasts but a day." My own definition might be "that which lasts until first rainfall" but the clay hangs on, it fades, slowly, very slowly, it remains in a faded state for more than six weeks, depending on the weather. It takes ages until finally no trace of the clay can be found. This bothers me.



Figure 15. Clay fading on a rock from September 14 – October 31, 2013. I began to measure the time it took for the clay to fade completely away.

The clay had surprising lasting quality. Certainly the work is ephemeral *eventually*, but not quickly enough for my taste so I had to wrestle expectations into place again and deal with definitions; just what do I mean by ephemeral in this context? There is a beauty in ephemeral work that is fleeting, I was working with a light touch on the earth in terms of the materials used and the technique, but I wanted an even lighter touch. Artist Nils Udo, who creates what he calls

“plantings,” has struggled with the nature of his interventions, and here he describes a conundrum with his work:

Even if I work parallel to nature and only intervene with the greatest possible care, a basic internal contradiction remains. It is a contradiction that underlies all of my work, which itself can't escape the inherent fatality of our existence. It harms what it touches: the virginity of nature. (cited Green-museum, 2014, para 3).

Udo is articulate about the ultimate difficulties in creating work that has a light touch.



Figure 16. July – August 2012. Another rock fading slowly. I was shocked at how long the clay took to fade.

Time was one aspect of the problem but ephemerality as an aesthetic quality was something I had not considered. Eco-art might have a different aesthetic. Can ephemerality be an aesthetic quality that one can appreciate in and of itself in a work of art? Land artist Goldsworthy lets a string of leaves float down a river; they break apart in the current and disperse – short lived but the red line of coloured leaves is filmed. Recently, technology has improved our ability to create immense complex snow drawings using EPS (external positioning systems). Other artists and scientists have collaborated to create equally large drawings in the desert sand. On completion, within seconds they will begin to shift, change, and disappear with the wind. Artist Basia Irland uses a complement of both the ephemeral and a more permanent intent with her series of ice “books.” These are embedded with seeds, laid out like lines of text and the “books” are placed in various spots along a river bank. They will melt and the seeds encased in them will be left on the banks in the hope that they will take hold and grow (see Figure 29). De Caires Taylor’s underwater sculptures also illustrate a blend of ephemerality and permanence. The sculptures that he creates and places underwater will

disappear beneath coral crustaceans that build on their surfaces; the sculpture is permanent and ephemeral at the same time. The original sculptures of figures and faces disappear leaving a human-made coral reef as the result.

Eco-art works display ephemerality in varying ways and degrees and another insight about this came to me when the paddling and painting was coming to an end. A neighbour commented that perhaps I should consider how to make the clay marks last rather than wishing them away so quickly. This suggestion came at the same time I was given a book by Sellwyn Dewdney (1962), documenting his project to locate all the pictographs around this area of northwestern Ontario, causing me to consider one more layer of ephemerality. Dewdney's work is well known, as are the Ojibwe rock paintings which he studied. I am familiar with them in the context of the Woodland style art by local artists Norval Morrisseau and Roy Thomas, the painting style having some of its roots in such pictographs. The act of paddling out and painting along the shoreline has some history and it felt good to remember that. People around the world have painted on rocks. The caves of Lascaux in France are a well-recorded example and have received recent attention with the discovery of amazing renderings of large mammals in a newly discovered cave. I respect this ancient tradition and enjoy the fact that the act is quite primordial, but my concern with ephemerality is in complete contrast to the persistent and amazing tenacity of those ancient rock paintings.

Working at a Gallery, I am aware of the care that goes into storing and ensuring paintings are well kept so that they don't start to deteriorate. Dim lighting and careful humidity control are two considerations for art works, meticulous maintenance that is in stark contrast to the exposure of those red ochre images at Quetico and Agawa Provincial Parks. Not only are the drawings unprotected from severe weather of all kinds, in all seasons, but these pictographs are subjected to powerful waves and close enough to the water's edge to experience spray on a daily basis. Yet, astonishingly, they have survived for hundreds of years. Clearly, the paint is not made of clay. The pictographs at Agawa have been photographed and are now showing annual change as they fade.

These paintings will eventually disappear so are ephemeral after all but over a longer time frame than I was imagining for my work. Despite all of these varied ways of considering ephemerality in eco-art, in the end it is enough to recognize that there is beauty in that which is ecologically sound because it is that which disappears in but a day, a week ... two months ... or three hundred years.



Figure 17. Summer 2013. Rock facing shore. By this time I was paddling and painting from the boat, as well as looking for rocks that faced shore where the marks were much less likely to be seen.

Later on in my practice, when I tried paddling and painting, I discovered the clay, subject to wave action, faded and disappeared more rapidly. Ephemerality changes our relationship to an artwork. I wonder if one might value and pay closer attention to something we know is transitory than an art work that is “permanent”?

Other aesthetic considerations for eco-art

How do we critically look at eco-art? When I had my first students create eco-art, I was concerned with transferring the elements and principles of design, simply moving them to an outdoor setting and using the materials found there. Dwelling on the elements and principles of design does not enhance the premise that eco-art deals with our relationship to nature. The elements and principles of design are a way of talking about art, but I would argue are given exaggerated status in the curriculum documents. One need not miss the *experience* of the art by focusing too much on principles and elements of design. What I mean by this might be explained using music education as an example: imagine teaching all the theory and language of music without listening to music, singing, dancing, or playing an instrument, and only identifying time signatures, key signatures, and the signs of expression. The elements and principles of design can just as

effectively muffle our experience of art if those are the primary lenses that we ask teachers to look through when teaching art. In doing the work of a creative practice in the genre of eco-art, the issue of aesthetics did come up and I am being pushed to reconsider the language of aesthetics and what an aesthetic experience can be about.

There are obscure publications called exhibit catalogues that are written by curators when an exhibit is put together, which tend to end up in storage until someone doing research calls. *Still Moments* (2008), by curator Les Buckingham is just such an art exhibit catalogue, focused on Eric Geddes' land art. A friend dropped it on my desk. In it, there is discussion of seven Zen-oriented qualities of art. Although I do not align myself with Zen philosophy, I am drawn to how it speaks to qualities of his work and possibly other artworks such as those by Goldsworthy, Long, or Udo. I am intrigued by the idea that students could make comments such as, "I like the simplicity, the naturalness, the detachment" or "I like the tranquility or subtlety" instead of "I like the colour." Two years ago I came across striking simplicity in the design of a wampum belt that is a piece in the permanent collection at the Gallery where I work. Two parallel lines represent the profound message that two peoples, two cultures may live side by side, with room for both, without crossing the other, diverting the other. These two parallel lines are, for me, a wonderful example of "profound simplicity."

I also liked the word "detachment" as an aesthetic quality, it being a good partner to a work's ephemeral nature, since one must be detached to feel comfortable with its decay or disappearance. I find I am able to be detached from my own pieces, but I admit that when certain works students completed at the Gallery broke down, I was anything but detached as I had grown to enjoy sharing their work with other students and tour groups. Student works have typically lasted one to two years. Initially and throughout the project, the clay "paint" disappearing had a connection for me to the North American consumptive lifestyle and its problematic result of accumulation. Art making that does not involve resources, extra materials and tools, and that will disappear, is to be

appreciated. When something is permanent we might wish to possess it, keep it, collect it. Eco-art can shift the focus from acquisition to experience. Ephemeralness is a quality of art making, as both a product and a process that I deem essential and beautiful in its cleanness.



Figure 18. Fall 2012. A changing aesthetic: simplicity, detachment and subtlety.

Weintraub (2012) presents another angle and contribution when she writes about eco-art aesthetics. She describes processes in nature and ecological understanding as aesthetic considerations. Weintraub claims artists are looking to ecosystems for understanding and inspiration, and for visualization of patterns and shapes within ecosystems. This piqued my interest because here again we see the meeting of art and scientific inquiry. Artists can provide visuals that might help our developing ecological literacy (Orr, 1994). Weintraub (2012) presents some specific ideas that I had not considered before, such as multiplicity, progressions, lines as tubes, complexity and chaos, and fractals. Her ideas about aesthetics acknowledge “nature’s design efficiencies” (pg. 33).

Could ecologists look to artists to find ways to express the same? It helps to start thinking about relationships and then you start to see these designs in nature. For example, artist Betsy Damon mimics water flow down a mountain in the design for her work, *Living Water Garden* (1999). Another example would be expressing with a tube, not simply a line. Tubes represent function in our environment such as veins, a plant stem, or even an engineered pipe. These tubes all carry things: blood, nutrients, waste. We all know line is an element of design but the point here is to consider them as elongated cylinders, conduits, performing functions. They exist in nature and are

engineered by humans. They include blood vessels, tree trunks and plant stems, electrical lines, pipelines, and sewage pipes. Tubes perform essential functions and act as one of nature's "design efficiencies."

I attempted a series based on these images, which was fun but it felt contrived. It has potential, but in my endeavour I did not want to plan or know the outcome; I wanted to be attentive to the process and experience. With artworks there is often an ambiguity and the viewer may complete the process. There is a feedback loop and more than one meaning is possible. For most of my project there was simplicity in my mark making and symbols. It was a satisfying process and the work is of course important to me, but often it is personal and its meaning to me unimportant to this thesis. Indeed, I freely admit, I hide. Unfair, yes alright, but all I can say is that I have tried to keep myself out of the way and at times had bigger ideas in mind, but of course there is some indulgence in mark making, doodling, in painting, drawing ... in art.



Figure 19. Acknowledging the rock.

The creative practice I adopted is not a difficult or necessarily lengthy process. I have to get myself to the shoreline, find a rock, settle into the place, and then paint something. Does it matter that the work disappears, or not? Was there a way to get the marks to last for a hundred years? Who would see them? Who would care? What was the intent? My intent most of the time was simply to continue with the process once I had chosen it and to get myself "out there." If connecting to place was of importance, then once I made it, the judgment about whether it was a "good" rock or that I

would come back and say “it didn’t work today” was secondary. Gradually, I developed a pretty good record of getting out and, more often than not, I would be pleased that, first, I had made it out, second, that I had found a rock, and three, that the design had in some way worked for me.

Aesthetics and Eco-art education

How can an aesthetic experience with the works of an eco-artist lead children to take in more through their senses and to understand such concepts through art making? Song (2007) also asked this question in her dissertation. What really makes ecological artworks unique, not only as aesthetic experiences but as learning experiences? How can eco-art in educational settings inform, inspire, and engage students around environmental issues? Eco-artworks could initiate discussions and foster connections while providing elementary and middle school students with the opportunities to view and ponder existing artworks, create their own natural artworks, and heighten their ecological awareness (Song, 2007). I have been shown works by children that were done with the petals of flowers, which meant a huge patch of flowers was stripped of its petals. Yes, the work is ephemeral but did it improve our relationship with nature? This, for me, remains the larger question. I still appreciate the art, I may still be moved by it, but my perspective on ephemerality has shifted to a relativist stance. Although ephemerality is important in eco-art, for the time that the artwork does last, another important consideration is “subtlety.” I am drawn to metaphors because they make a point in a subtle way. I like marks on the rock that *belong*, do not overtake it; they therefore they should be subtle.

How, then, does one talk about eco-art? For me there needs to be a slightly different language. We can ask: is it ephemeral? Is it subtle? Does it fit into the place, does it belong, does it intrude, and if so with what purpose, does it help you pay attention to the place? If we use the lens of lyrical expression, critical engagement, and transformative action, then how does the work fit in that model? Non-intrusiveness, subtlety, and ephemerality is the language of eco-art. During my own practice, I debated such aesthetic considerations as I made marks on the rocks.



Figure 20. July 2012. The rock in the centre image did not fade. I took the rock to the geology department to get it identified. It turned out to be porous sandstone. After months, it faded slightly.



Figure 21. July 2013. Still observing the fading process. Even with torrential downpours the clay persisted.

I will paint another rock with clay today. The regular non-writing part of my research is becoming habit. I am starting to think of it more as mark making that lightly explores design, plays with line, follows and expresses ideas. I continue to like the connection to the bottom of the lake – I like the integrity in the exercise of gathering the clay. So far, the rocks I like best are about “decoration” such as you might find on wallpaper. Uh oh, this bothers me – wall paper! My lines have ideas behind them, or moods, pulses, waves, plant shadows, circular in nature, dots simply for fun. But they also have the look of disease ... that bothers me too. A rock does not want to look diseased or like it’s been wallpapered. Although I drew a likable fish last year, I don’t want imagery and have done little of that since as it feels like using the rock simply as a page. The marks get rejected or kept when I ask, “Does it work?” If the rocks don’t look embarrassed or smothered with the painting on them, it partly works. I have started to notice that a design fails for me if

there isn't repetition, if it isn't simple, when it tries too hard; the lines that wrap the rock easily, and those that go down with relative ease, I wonder if it shows in the brush strokes when there is a loose easiness reflected in the lines. I'd like to slow down and be more careful, more articulate with the lines, but I like the ease more than the tight and tidy. Still I feel with the right combination of coffee and concentration I could accomplish a neater design on the rock. I believe in craftsmanship, I notice it, but even if I am not in a rush, I tend to rush. I have allowed myself not to become overly concerned about results but I speculate, and am optimistic, that this creative practice is one that powers one into a slower gear and I wonder what would happen if I became concentrated in that way and used some suggestions such as one of the "design efficiencies" as inspiration for design? I approach the work with persistence, but it is not forced, I continue to enjoy doing it. A journal entry on the rock, without words ... I don't need words and that is a relief.



Figure 22. A growing collection. 2012 – 2013. My mark-making consistently had lines. The rocks I looked for were consistently dark basalt.

vi) Restoration and Atonement

Driven by the desire to strengthen the planet's weakened defenses and preserve remnants of our planet's vitality, these artists venture beyond conventional art boundaries into uncharted territories...eco artists can be viewed as either defectors from art or as pioneers inaugurating a new art movement. (Weintraub, 2012 p. xiv).

There is one further eco-art aesthetic perhaps best described by Hull's (2001) idea of ecoatonement.

Does the work function in a restorative manner and, if so, is that when it is really "working"?

Weintraub (2012) makes a strong case for including, "Does it work? Does it do something?" in our evaluation of, and encounters with, eco-art.

Parallel to the experimental work with clay on the rocks was the background reading I was doing about eco-artists whose work continued to inspire and surprise me. What happens, what events have to converge that turn art makers into concerned and active citizens? Artists participating in what Hull called 'eco atonement' had been demanding my attention from the beginning and still hovered in the background. By chance, Amazon.com came up with a "recommended read" for me and I found myself with the book, *To Life: Eco Art For a Sustainable Planet* (Weintraub, 2012). The author boldly asks the question as to whether the work of eco-artists creates a whole new aesthetic and, although I don't personally agree that we should judge art work in this way, her choices of eco-artists merit some exploration.

Environmental problems can make one feel uncomfortable and helpless. Studying the work of eco-artists that had transformed helplessness into creative action was refreshing and informed my project as I came to see that searching for an art practice that did not use resources was also a form of restoration on a small scale. Eco-artists who have restored a landscape, improving its current condition and ecological function, are part of an exciting approach taken on by an increasing number of eco-artists. The restorative work is extremely varied in its forms, from community picnics to the creation of a shepherd school (Weintraub, 2012). Eco-art can play a role in

restoration and help guide humanity past our resistance to change and challenge, to encourage sustainable lifestyles, and face the socio-ecological challenges ahead.

Art critic and historian, Suzi Gablik, author of *Has Modernism Failed* (1986) and *The Reenchantment of Art* (1991), called for such action from artists. The Collins and Reiko (2003) model of environmental art making uses lyrical expression, critical engagement, and transformative action as areas around which to consider eco-art. A lot of work I was coming across was falling clearly into the action segment. Gablik (1991) criticized artists for not engaging in life, for isolating themselves. She extends the issue of separation to art and life. She points to the fact they need not be separate, artists need not sit back and observe. Gablik argues that newer aesthetics will not be found in galleries and museums or beautiful objects but in visible manifestations of heartfelt concerns. Chapter 8 in her book, *The Reenchantment of Art*, has the phrase “out of the frame; Art as compassionate action” (p. 138). Galleries also hold the heartfelt concerns of artists, but Gablik does foreshadow a lot that has happened in the eco-art genre – artworks made in the spirit of ecological activism.

Let us look at artworks that present as restoration projects such as those already mentioned in this study, *7000 Oaks Action* by Beuys, *Wheatfield: A confrontation* by Denes, and *Raptor Nest* by Hull where she used her skills as a sculptor to aid wildlife, creating nesting sites for raptors in particular, with the help of biologists and ornithologists. This project was appealing visually and successful practically; birds used the nesting sites for years. Irland’s *ICE BOOKS: receding/reseeding* was a project intended to reseed riverbanks with native plant species to prevent erosion. Also previously mentioned, *Vicissitudes* (2006) by artist, photographer, and scuba diver de Caires Taylor, is a series of underwater sculptures that have gradually transformed into coral reefs, atoning for their destruction.

Water emerged as a theme in the works of several artists. Damon created *The Living Water Garden* (1998) in China and founded the organization, Keepers of the Waters, in St Paul Minnesota. The backstory of *The Living Water Garden* is motivating. Damon suggested that a park be

constructed to help clean the river and teach citizens about the environment. Apparently when asked if she could do this, she responded, “Yes” even though she had never done such a project (Spaid, 2002). Her confidence resulted in an innovative design that mimicked water flow down a mountain to increase aeration in the water. The work was intended to clean river water, but unfortunately was too small in scale to affect the overall water quality of the river. Nevertheless, Damon feels her work acts as a laboratory and a symbol of what is possible. Back in the United States, her organization, Keepers of the Water also attempts to draw attention to the importance of water by providing support to those wanting to organize grassroots movements leading to other living water parks and other remediation projects “deemed unimportant by government entities” (Spaid, 2002, p. 112). In Germany, another example on a water and air quality theme is a work by Jackie Brookner. She created a large cement tongue that she covered with volcanic rock and mosses. The piece is called *Prima Lingua* (1996) and the sculpture acts in a similar fashion to a “bio wall” of plants cleansing the air and water which continuously runs over its surface.

Spaid (2002) documented such realized ecological art projects in an exhibit and catalogue called *ecoventions*. The term “ecovention” (ecology + invention) was coined in 1999 to describe artist-initiated projects that physically transform a local ecology. Artists collaborate with community members and local specialists such as architects, botanists, zoologists, ecologists, engineers, landscape architects, and urban planners to realize and evaluate their scientifically complex projects. Blandy, Congdon and Krug (1998) note that contemporary artists have participated in the restoration of ecosystems and that the art produced has become a catalyst for a deeper awareness of nature.

Weintraub (2012), who created a book on eco-artists, says that her files “brim with artists from across the globe who are applying environmental remedies and defenses” (p. xiv). In many of these projects, there is collaboration with scientists; these artists have sought out scientists, but I wondered if scientists might also seek out artists with whom to collaborate? Curtis, Reid, and

Ballard (2012) published a study that looked at what scientists thought of communicating ecology through art. In 2003, they surveyed scientists at the Ecological Society of Australia Conference, and found that 80% supported an artistic presentation of scientific data. A notable example of this is the work being done by Nalini Nadkarni, a scientist who studies forest canopy biota and hopes to increase awareness of canopy ecology with non-scientific audiences through art (Curtis et al., 2012). These scientists agreed that communicating their research to the general public could be helped by an artistic approach; they saw the arts as way to assist in their research to not only present findings but gain further insights as well (Curtis et al., 2012). Scientific organizations in the United Kingdom and Australia have an artist-in-residence program so that artists can respond to science and make it accessible (Curtis et al., 2012). This kind of collaboration is a departure from what I have presented about eco-art thus far: scientists approaching artists rather than artists taking the lead and asking scientists for information to assist in the creation of their artworks. Scientists could be asking artists to interpret and communicate science. The study represents optimism for the marriage of art and science but – here comes another surprise – it also showed that while over 80% enjoyed the presentation of science in an artistic form (including but not be limited to theatre, performance, music, visual art and in particular photography), only 24% actually said that they themselves would consider using art to present their own research.

Eco-artists and Artworks that Have a Restorative Focus

As shown above, there is a trend of eco-artists creating work to promote sustainability, but the question arises: do the ecological goals of the work compromise aesthetics? Do ecological goals present a challenge to the definition of an artistic practice? Below I will provide examples of artists who illustrate how these questions arise and how they demonstrate that ecological and artistic goals need not be seen as mutually exclusive. *Revival Field* (1991) by artist Mel Chin involved planting hyperaccumulator plants in the soils of a dump site in St Paul Minnesota. These accumulator plants were to absorb toxins in the soil, to clean it. This is an example of a restorative art project that

pushes beyond art as object making to art as ecological activism and collaboration with scientific methods. Chin worked with a scientist to work out the concept for this piece and the plans for it are now kept in the Public Art Gallery in Minneapolis illustrating the acceptance that this work is indeed a form of art.

A Shepherds School (2007) by Garcia-Dory, mentioned previously, is another example of art that is a combination of social practice, installation, public art and generative art. Garcia-Dory is updating (in a big way) pastoral art, by addressing the demise of a pastoral lifestyle, specifically that of the shepherd, through an action project. He approaches the issue as an ecologist would a species about to go extinct, which means he addresses: i) propagation (by creating a shepherd school); ii) bolstering of defenses (by using technology to help with issues such as predators); and iii) creation of a “hospitable” habitat for shepherds (by increasing public support by bringing the shepherds themselves in to a gallery as part of an exhibit). In getting the shepherds to talk about the real versus the perceived often romantic, notions of shepherding, Garcia created a sympathetic environment for the shepherds. This piece is considered a collective environmental project. Garcia illustrates the pragmatic, social, and psychological effect of a lifestyle of shepherding: pastoralism offers a sustainable model of agro-food production and shepherding satisfies the desire to live “in tune with the seasons, in partnership with animals, in service to the planet” (cited in Weintraub, 2012, p. 158). I predict that Garcia’s work will be harder to explain as an art practice and it is bold to consider people as your artistic medium. Indeed, Weintraub (2012) describes it as “a bold experiment in art as social ecology with a pragmatic mission” (p. 156). In Hull’s raptor nesting project, birds used the nests, but are people becoming shepherds in Garcia’s rural part of Spain? The answer is yes and no. Garcia has seen one hundred students through his shepherd school but “few of the one hundred graduates are pursuing shepherding” (p. 156). This does not represent failure by any means because each graduate would have spent months doing rigorous apprentice work in the field and would fully understand shepherding when there was little such knowledge before.

Looking further back, also already mentioned, a pioneer in this type of performance and social practice art is Ukeles and her work with the sanitation department of New York. Ukeles used tactics in language by renaming garbage collectors health providers and calling them sanmen not “garbage men” (sexist language was not on her radar at that time). She treated the people who handle waste with dignity, attempting to bring them to the attention of the public. A pioneer in eco-art, she began this work in 1969. Weintraub astutely observes that Ukeles’ contribution was not to align art with consumer culture; in fact, her art practice was non-consumptive. One well-known work that took her 11 months to complete was called *Touch Sanitation* (1979-80) in which she shook the hands of all the sanitation workers in New York City; individually and face to face, she thanked each one with the phrase, “Thank you for keeping New York City alive.” I present these works because they are important examples of what eco-art can look like. Like Long, Ukeles in her own way had a light touch with her art work. She was not using resources and although she certainly wasn’t working in a forested or natural environment, she was acknowledging nature by addressing the difficult, overwhelming issue of waste production in a large city.

Studying works of eco-art and the practice of eco-artists is important to eco-art education. This may sound entirely obvious, but one study (Inwood, 2010) found that teachers who try out eco-art generally focus upon the Goldsworthy model and study his work to the exclusion of all else, even when presented with alternatives. This is understandable given the strong aesthetic appeal and accessibility of Goldsworthy’s work, but the stories of other eco-artists are worth telling as well. It would be interesting to challenge students’ perceptions of art making through examination of other eco-artists. For example, students could learn about *7000 Oaks Action* by Beuys, which is accepted as the largest ecological sculpture in the world and students could be asked: is planting trees a creative act? Gradle (2008) describes a project where an invasive plant is removed and the plant material used for a weaving project; students could ponder interesting questions about that eco-art too. And, finally, is not the act of painting outdoors with clay on rocks and other materials an

“ecovention”? Is it eco-art and does it in fact, in the end, have the restorative aspect of challenging art educators to green up their art cupboards and store of art lessons to branch out and include a way of working that does not use resources? I am not advocating getting rid of regular art making activities, but I *am* advocating for art making and an arts curriculum that promotes and celebrates the work of eco-artists with similar projects to those I have presented here.

Restorative Eco-art Projects in Educational Settings.

Sobel (1996) discusses the issue of the appropriate time in which to introduce students to environmental issues. The focus centres around three distinct stages of child development, including the early years, ages four to seven, when empathy is developed; Sobel calls this phase “Finding Animal Allies.” The second phase of development, from ages seven to eleven, focuses on exploration, which Sobel calls “Teaching the Landscape.” The final phase of development, from ages twelve to beyond fifteen, is focused on social action, which Sobel calls, “Saving the Neighborhood.” Various student accounts are presented within his book demonstrating these different phases of development. The main concern of Sobel is the concept of “ecophobia.” He asks when the appropriate age might be to introduce students to environmental issues and how one might shape their future desire to care for and love the environment. He argues that introducing heavy environmental concepts and problems too early can lead to a disconnect with the world rather than a love of it.

I would suggest that restoration and acts of atonement present a way to offset the negative impact of overwhelming environmental problems. Eco-art projects promote children connecting to a place, finding special places, and attaching to them. Projects that involve collaboration and restoration can embody a lot of hope. I have hope in future students with eco-art. Take Gradle’s (2008) description of a collaborative project in her article, “When Vines Talk.” Invasive plant species were foraged and collected by students and made into art objects. This accomplished two things: an area had an invasive plant removed and a student group gets material to work with, using

the vines for various art projects. Six years later a similar project might include discussion as to what exactly is invasive, which in itself is a complex issue.

When describing her classroom practice of teaching eco-art, educator Rosenthal (2003) says she develops the mind and heart of the matter. Further, she describes that an environmental ethic can be built on an understanding of the interdependent web of life – not as an idealization of nature, but as sound science based on systems thinking (Capra, 1996). This is not to discount the spiritual, intuitive, and poetic dimensions of our relationship with nature. Rather, the creative challenge is to craft emotion and reason into compelling visual statements that appeal to both heart and mind. By the end of the semester, Rosenthal found students had redefined nature to encompass both human and non-human. Here is a quote from one of Rosenthal's students: "My perceptions of 'nature' have changed from a dichotomy to an all-inclusive definition . . . where nature is actually inclusive of the manmade [sic]. This changes our relationship with the environment in that we must work in harmony with it. As I go into my professional life, I believe I will maintain this idea of collaboration with the earth" (p. 158).

According to Wallen (2000), eco-art is meant to "challenge perceptions, elucidate the complex structure of an ecosystem, examine a particular issue . . . or work directly to physically restore the biophysical environment" (cited in Rosenthal, 2003, p. 154). Rosenthal argues that if this is the definition, then theory must translate into action. Theory can be synthesized into eco-art forms that communicate deeper understandings of the relationships between human and non-human others. She suggests if students are exposed to diverse nature discourses, through examining eco-art, their own projects will be more effective in educating and inspiring others.

At first glance my own practice seems like lyrical expression (see Figure 5), and yet these artists and their works are calls to action to "do" something. What does a practice like mine do? This question might be like asking what does meditation do or what does taking a walk do? I propose that my eco-art does indeed "do" something. A practice such as the one I have developed

addresses the particular issue of disconnect, gets one outside, often in a calm state, *in* place, and *with* the place. Not many activities can claim such simplicity; there is no “app” embedded in the rocks. I had to find them, get there, be there, respond with brush and clay. I didn’t draw attention to the location – my intent was to leave it alone. I didn’t leave anything permanent. I whispered, it was personal, it is almost a secret.



Figure 23. Fall 2012. I consistently enjoyed being right at the shoreline, at times standing in the water.

SECTION FOUR

Returning to Shore

The shore is largely associated with feelings of calm reflection, safety, and familiarity. As humans, we live on land, we look out on the water, and we enjoy doing so. This narrative, which is part of my field notes for this study, is about leaving familiar “places” where one feels secure, about leaving caution behind. It is also, most appropriately, given where we are now at in this thesis, about endings.

Narrative: Final Days of the Project

This morning I have returned from the city and find that the dock has been pulled up. It is Thanksgiving weekend, late in the season for paddling, but the air is warm and balmy, and as this will be one of my last excursions to paint a rock, I am looking forward to getting out. The waves are rhythmically and persistently hitting the shore and the wind is warm but stronger than usual. Despite an awkward entry into the kayak, I venture out, bow first, into the water and away from shore. A checklist rolls through my mind as I paddle out: a spray skirt that doesn't fit, a jammed rudder that won't release, a note on the kitchen counter, written at the last minute, to appease my daughter when she heard I would be out here alone for five days. Halfway out I am having second thoughts about going at all, but with the growing waves, turning the boat around would mean getting into an unstable position. I decide to paddle without rudder until I reach the far shore where I'll be able to grab hold of a rock with one hand and, with the other, hopefully jiggle the rope to drop the rudder into the lake. The waves are building, but I can see a line in the water ahead indicating a calmer area in front of the island. Lake Superior is a big lake that produces large waves, and as a cautious paddler, I would not be out here if it were not part of my investigation, my experiment. This thought triggers the usual pleasant anticipation of another rock and deciding what marks to make. A creative practice with a bit of adventure has become something I look forward to. I have met plenty of artists who have described to me unusual approaches to creating their work, and mine is a small, passing obsession, an experiment only, just

for the research or the story. I have often used the refrain, "I can't stop now with regards to the Master of Ed program and art informed research," and I hear it again out on the lake this morning. I am three quarters of the way across and "I can't stop now." I recall telling a group of educators that it is worth it to take risks in your teaching practice. Following my own advice, I have tried taking students outdoors using a different approach to art. When I reach calmer waters, I take care of the rudder, which simply needed straightening to lower easily. I feel more relaxed and head round the corner. Paddling up a familiar stretch, I do my usual look for remnants of earlier work and I find one smudged rock. It seems that once there is a lot of wave action, the clay does not leave neatly faded lines but, rather, a smudgy grayness. At times, nature can contribute to the work and at times not.

I am not as comfortable sitting in a boat and painting as on land. I feel rushed, yet I enjoy being on the water. I enjoy working on the vertical surface of a rock face. Today it takes longer than usual to decide what to paint. The results are less pleasing, and thus less satisfying when I cannot relax into the moment as I paint. Note to the eco-art education section: expect and accept some disappointment, remain critical, and remember, rushing doesn't help. There needs to be time to centre yourself before starting. Increasingly, I realize we have to adjust to what is available. What do we all have? We are all, at times, rushed or pressed and simply stuck with what time we get. What I lose in time I gain in getting out each day. Part of the time that I could be painting is now replaced with paddling time, but this is a gain in awareness of place. The painting after all is a reason to get out; the motivation is the play and each time, some aspect of this outdoor world speaks to me. Today it is the landscape of a rising sun and black landforms against a pink sky. I am not one to get exhilarated by a pretty landscape scene, in fact this one actually looks a little threatening, but I take it in. I make the push to get close to shore, scan the rocks, and choose a place to do my mark making. Barely beginning, I realize I want to get back to the dock more than I want to finish and get another photograph. For the first time, I don't get the clay out, which is unfortunate because this may be my last

paddle for the season, but the waves are nudging and pushing the boat more forcefully and I take this personally: okay, I am leaving.

The wind is building and it is rough crossing back over; I talk myself through the first leg, positioning the kayak in front of a different island where I can catch my breath, and I watch a raft of mergansers passing by. They dive down in unison except for one that paddles in an unconcerned manner by my boat. As I scan to see where the group will surface, they suddenly appear six feet from the kayak, many birds making swallowing actions and one with a small fish wiggling and still visible in its bill. I watch it swallow and, of course, I don't have the camera ready although I often make a deliberate choice not to use it. Ahead, there is another bird, this one alone, acting and looking like a loon, but the distinctive pattern is wrong, perhaps an immature non-breeding one. As I get closer, it dives and I consider its direction, guessing as to where it will surface. Turning and looking in every direction, I still don't see the bird. After what seems too long to be underwater, a silhouette against the far island catches my eye - it seems impossible for it to have swam that far underwater. I am impressed and turn back, knowing I will never catch up to it. I have to admit I enjoy these encounters with wildlife. It is part of the relationship with this place that I value. Where does this fit into eco-art education? I recall questioning students completing eco-art projects in an outdoor area, whether they had seen any fauna and I rarely got more than the mention of a squirrel. It occurs to me that one could suggest to students that they take time to survey all forms of life around them before settling into their creative work.

What surfaces the following morning is that much against my more social nature, I concede there is something to be gained by being alone. Despite the qualities I have found to be important to eco-art, such as collaboration and community-based art, I realize that I have to speak to the positive outcomes of spending time outdoors alone.

The next day, and what turns out to be the last paddle day, is calm and more productive. I land on the south side of the closest island where one last development in my practice occurs. I have always been aware of this exercise as a kind of following in that I follow and am open to seeing what happens. It feels like an objective stance. By this time, my concern with graffiti has me looking for rocks that face towards shore. This morning, I find one such rock and then decide to uplift several rocks nearby. I paint their bottoms with various designs and images, some figures, one that is an ode to coffee and one with the suggestion of veins. I remember the idea of tubes as one of nature's efficiencies. I quickly take a few photo shots and they are not even dry before I turn them face down. This is my "the end" - the twenty-metre mural will have to wait another season because here is the final touch, hidden completely and not at all what I had expected to do! Would anyone ever find them?



Figure 24. Oct. 2013. The final morning paddle.



Figure 25. A rock that goes face down, the last rock of the season and the final shift in the practice.

Concluding Discussion and Looking Ahead

The following comments might be seen as the sunset view from shore; one stands back to get the bigger picture and a final view of the project. The discussion entails a look back on an arts-informed research project and includes some final thoughts on eco-art projects, and anticipates prospects for eco-art in educational settings in the future. Although the scope of the project is acknowledged, a look to further research possibilities is emphasized. A sunrise might be a more appropriate analogy but a view from shore can be expansive at any time of day.

This project began as an exploration of the eco-art genre, to push forward a subject area that is underutilized in educational settings. The project shifted to explore eco-art through doing it, to having a practice. This research method was a significant part of my thesis journey and another aspect of leaving the shore. In my third musing (p. 46), I describe the importance of a sense of adventure in the practice of eco-art and the same might apply to this form of research. The format and demands of arts-informed research present a dynamic territory to work in. Eco-art and arts-informed research share a return to the senses and the doing of creative work that forms a search engine in its own right. Ideas emerge during the making process. The presence of the researcher is expected in arts-informed research; further, the researcher as artist is accepted. Upon final reflection, I conclude it was a good choice in method for this thesis. Seeing research and art making in this light became an area deep with possibilities to me and any time I come across research that is arts-informed or arts based, I find my interest rises.

When assessing this type of research, one must demonstrate that the work is accessible: “One of the key features of a well-designed arts-informed investigation is that the experience resonates with that of others – it is therefore trustworthy” (Eisner cited by Ewing, 2005, p.138). Having taught eco-art lessons individually to six young adults, one adult class, a high school class, and one elementary group, I am confident that the topic and ideas of eco-artists resonate with both educators and students. Sharing my own work and more personal journey was challenging but has

been positive thus far, based on the feedback I have received from five individuals and a group of peers in one of my Master of Education classes.

The selection of stories and perspectives on the topic is shaped by my eco-art journey and by the repertoire of artists and their experiences that I chose to include. I agree with others that eco-artists are not receiving the acknowledgment that they deserve (Spaid, 2002). In a thesis such as this, I naturally have time and length constraints, leaving hundreds of artists and their stories for discovery and use in the future. This means I can pass on the resources I have gathered thus far and can look forward to finding many more extraordinary eco-art works. In particular, I will look for video work in this field that record the workings of eco-artists since video work is especially suited to the ephemeral form that eco-art work often takes.

Through this process, it has become apparent that just because the researcher's creative practice is the focus, it does not mean that the focus is on the researcher. The personal and the particular are present but the ideas and purpose of furthering knowledge hold the spotlight. If research is morally motivated, then how the research can contribute to education in some way must remain in the foreground. Eisner (2012) exhorts us to ensure that what is significant is foremost. The study must come back to bigger questions: does this work contribute to a better relationship with nature and with places, to ecological literacy and integrity? For the past few years I have used less paint and more clay, spent more time outdoors and less at a work table indoors. As well, my art education cupboard is less stocked and the outdoor space more walked upon, the outdoor artworks at the Gallery have had many more hands on them. Eco-art and this research drew me outdoors and got me looking, touching, and responding to the environment wherever I happened to be. The word relationship is important – we are in relation with nature and all its countless forms. It is one relationship that is all-consuming, yet that we manage to keep at a distance or ignore in our busy, technologically dominated lives. Relationships are not simple and it is not always easy to visit or to be mindful of an outdoor place, but eco-art practices provide reason and

inspiration to find that connection again. Song (2007) comments that her engagement with nature went from being passive and distant to being active once she had embarked on regular eco-art projects. On another level, eco-art projects lead not only to relation but also to the position of active apology, which surely is a place of hope as discussed in my sixth musing on art as ecological restoration.

When working with something visual, there can be a time-consuming allure in artistic and aesthetic considerations. For example, the novelty of finding an innovative art making technique was a distraction for a little while, but I also found there is value in enjoying the novelty of an experience, whether it is taking part in a collaborative ecological art project or mark making with clay on rocks in solitude. Eventually, I was able to return to the original topic, which is the contribution that eco-art might make to the educational stage. At first glance, there is limited transferability of the approach of the described creative arts practice of painting with clay. Most people will not have access to the type of wilderness that I had for this study, nor is shoreline an easy setting for education. However, much of the specific technique is transferable and the environmental values that drive it are also applicable to a variety of natural and urban landscapes such as school grounds, parks or naturalized gardens.

The work began with four rules; no tools, be outdoors, use the materials on site, and the work must be ephemeral. I had trouble consistently following all four rules and as I wrap up the study, it occurs to me again that there is some irony in having had difficulties with the ephemeral aspect. The work was not meant to last, the practice itself was to be temporary, and yet the clay paint persisted and the practice persisted. The world does not sit still and research seems to imply a kind of freeze frame. Rules and guidelines and even research questions are starting places that might not have lasted throughout the practice - but the ephemeral persists.

In arts-informed research, the art itself has something to say, but in the case of my own practice, the art is not documenting something; rather, it emerges as a result of an experiment.

(Knowles & Cole, 2008). The underlying story of the process is not at all clear from looking at the photographs of painted rocks. That said, this should not overly concern us, since the intent of the art making was to move from thought and theory to action. The meaning of the marks I made on the rocks can remain unknown, perhaps ironically eliciting the very common response to art that takes many variations of “Huh? – I don’t get it.” So be it. The marks, and perhaps the reason for the use of the rocks themselves, remain vague, cryptic, or intensely personal symbolic references. On the other hand, I intend that the overall question of how I came to do the work will be clear and rationally understood. In the end, as I try in earnest to wrap up this project in a tidy way, the practice falls away. Since settling in to write, I have not touched a rock in months.

The project generated evidence of the role that eco-artists and their stories could play in a variety of educational settings as well as the value of exploring subject matter through lived experience. I hope that the work of eco-artists presented here is convincing evidence of the contribution the arts can make to restoring and addressing local ecological needs and supporting environmental education in schools and wherever it occurs. I also hope that the insights gained from the very act of an eco-arts practice will resonate with educators and point the way to some meaningful innovation in art and environmental science education practices as well as to the restoration of personal ecology. Bai (2009) talks about the need for reanimating the senses and believes that eco-art can help us “repair the hole in the psyche which is left when all traces of our biological and ecological roots are obliterated” (Sonfist cited in Spaid, 2002, p.8).

Topic areas that arose during the study are important to eco-art pedagogy. For example, the value of solitude and a sense of adventure, for example, provide useful considerations for educators interested in eco-art. They present a philosophical backdrop, another set of values with which to approach eco-art making. They are not always easy to include; for instance, how does one provide solitude for a group? Areas that I did not include are mindfulness, deep ecology, the importance of natural materials, the potency of practice, the idea of what Thich Naht Hahn would term

“Interbeing” (cited in Anderson & Suominen, 2012), and attention to the factor of time. These themes are worth exploring in future eco-art education studies. More research conducted along Song’s (2007) model where she had close contact with eco-artists also has great merit. Connecting with artists and how they work can be powerful.

Future directions for research include projects that tap into the currently under-described connection between science and art. Further study might look at three artists who have worked with scientists and three scientists who have approached artists. Additionally, senior high school environmental science classes could explore a unit on eco-art with a culminating project that serves a restorative function in the outdoors. Weintraub (2012) reminds us that in the seventeenth century, art made for domestic interiors was an innovation. In the same way, she claims that eco-art is art made to address humanity’s efforts to repair growing layers of environmental problems. Art does indeed respond to the needs of society. Ongoing and continuous eco-art projects around schoolyards not only have restorative function but create a story as well. Inwood’s video, *Environmental Art* (2013) tells such a story as it documents one school’s eco-art efforts.

Within the themes that I addressed, the issue of using the outdoors for art projects is not simple, but we must continue to push ourselves outdoors. While I promote outdoor activities, like most people, I sit indoors most of the time, facing a screen. Getting involved in creative art projects is motivation to take time away from the computer and move into the outside environment. There are many examples indicating that there is room for much exploration with the ephemeral and outdoor features of eco-art.

This study has expanded the ways that I view art materials and art making. The clay I chose as the paint medium could be used on other surfaces. I chose rocks but there are many other natural surfaces to work on outdoors and I did try the technique on trees and wooden surfaces. I have presented the use of clay as paint and the various possibilities that this technique provides, encouraging further research and development of ideas for other sustainable

art-making methods. This study provides an example of an approach to art making that is sensitive to sustainable practices and that has a light footprint.

Finally, what has happened to my eco-art pedagogy and the journey of the clay painting? An important aspect of art-informed research is that it is accessible. I look forward to getting back to some kind of teaching and sharing eco-art, and have included a short list of helpful resources for those who want to know more about eco-art practice (see Appendix B). For several months as I completed the writing part of the thesis, I started to think the practice I had established was, like so many journeys, over. It had run cold but now it seems more that the practice is on hold, waiting for the snow to melt and for me to return to the shore. My final thoughts on the subject are related to time and the importance of practice. One goes in hand with the other since practice implies a commitment of time. I hope anyone exploring eco-art finds a way to take even a short journey with their own ideas. The genre has rich and wide possibilities. As a creative practice, eco-art is growing exponentially. The outlook for eco-art as an art form and an educational tool is dynamic and alive.



Figure 26. Spring 2014.

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Appendix A

A SELECTION OF ECO-ARTISTS AND THEIR WORK

Eric Geddes is a lesser-known artist, sculptor, and arts educator in England. The beach and coastline of West Wight is Eric Geddes' inspiration, studio, and gallery; it supplies the source material for his ideas which he turns into "structures" (he prefers this less formal term to the word "sculpture") and the beach is the place that displays the work he does. Geddes underlines the importance of the artist Richard Long and the Zen qualities in his art, in particular, the ephemeral quality in his art. The idea of the ephemeral became a quality I explored consistently throughout the research process and by reading his exhibit catalogue, new qualities of art surfaced: simplicity, asymmetry, subtle profundity, ephemerality. This artist was the first I came across that seemed to challenge the language with which we speak about art; i.e., he goes beyond the elements and principles of design prescribed relentlessly in our curriculum guidelines.

Andy Goldsworthy is the artist that is somehow the epitome of an eco-artist. His work embodies much of what interests me about an eco-art practice. He works in the outdoors and his art works often have an ephemeral quality to them, being either swept away by tides, blown away by a strong breeze, or floated away as a line of red leaves that drift down a river and disappear. Goldsworthy's work also has strong aesthetic appeal. He brings another factor forward as well: the importance and inseparable part that *place* can play in the making of eco-art:

For me looking, touching, material, place and form are all inseparable from the resulting work. It is difficult to say where one stops and another begins. Place is found by walking, direction determined by weather and season. I take the opportunity each day offers: if it is snowing, I work in snow, at leaf-fall it will be leaves; a blown over tree becomes a source of twigs and branches. (Goldsworthy, 2005) Retrieved from www.ucblueash.edu/artcomm.

Goldsworthy is the gold standard for eco-art education (Inwood, 2009, 2010). I would say the documentary film *Rivers and Tides* about him has done more for promoting eco-art in educational settings than anything else. Inwood (2010) agrees. This video brands this style of making art, and makes it accessible to students of all ages.



Figure 27. Andy Goldsworthy. *Balanced Rock Misty*. Cangdale, Cumbria, May 1977.



Figure 28. Andy Goldsworthy. *Slate arch made over two days, fourth attempt*. Blaenauffestinog, Wales, Sept. 1982.

Lynne Hull coined the word “eco-atonement,” which was what drew me to her work. “She puts her sculpture at the service of wildlife, predicting their needs (with the expert help of biologists and other scientists) and projecting aid into sculptural form” (Lippard, 2000). In Hull’s work, I noticed an intriguing aspect and challenge for an eco-arts education practice, for example, the potential service of sculpture to wildlife and wildlife habitat.



Figure 29. Lynne Hull. *Raptor Roost L-2, with Ferrogenous Hawk* (1988).

Basia Irland is a sculptor and installation artist, a poet and book artist, and an activist for water issues. Her series *ICE BOOKS: receding/ reseeded* takes river water and freezes it in the shape of a book. She places “text” in the book by embedding seeds in the ice. The book form in ice encompasses the ephemeral by melting, but the seeds represent the opposite, the hope being that the seeds take hold and grow. Irland has worked to draw attention to the erosion and pollution of watersheds and her work embraces a restorative function. As a popular, successful eco-art project, her venture has been carried out in different places in collaboration with groups as community arts projects.



Figure 30. Basia Irland. *Tome I*, Boulder Creek, Colorado Figure 31. Irland, Basia. *ICE BOOKS: receding reseeded*. Ice, Seeds from Mountain Maple, Columbine flower, Blue Spruce 2007. Retrieved from <http://www.basairland.com/projects/index.html>. Reprinted with permission.

Ingrid Koivukangas is an artist of Finnish heritage from Saulte Ste Marie, ON. She completed an installation called *Diatom Whisper: Alchemy* (2009) at the waterfront in Thunder Bay, ON. In keeping with my valuing the local, it was important to me to include an art work found in the city of Thunder Bay. Koivukangas’ PhD research is based on an environmental land artist working in collaboration with architects. I am interested in these kinds of collaborations, and in particular the work shown below, as it relates to the intersection of ecology and art. Diatoms are tiny algae that account for a quarter of all the photosynthesis on earth. She calls them tiny alchemists, which make a larger contribution to fighting global warming than most land plants. *Diatom Whisper: Alchemy* (shown below) creates a visual of

the unseen microscopic world that lives in the waters of Lake Superior near the Marina Park Skate Plaza.



Figure 31. Ingrid Koivukangas. *Diatom Whisper: Alchemy* (2009). Cast and fused glass. Twelve images of microscopic diatoms collected from Lake Superior. Retrieved from <http://ingrid-koivukangas.com/images-p/diatoms.jpg>

Jason de Caires Taylor is an artist, photographer, and scuba diver, known for the first underwater sculpture park in the West Indies. Lynne Hull's term "eco atonement" applies to de Caires Taylor's work which is a form of reparation that addresses the destruction of coral reefs. The work also provides exceptional perspective on the ephemeral as the sculptures are subject to the dynamic, changing environment of the ocean, which alters the sculptures dramatically while at the same time, creating something permanent in the form of habitat. This work is awe-inspiring as eco-art and another amazing example of what happens when art and science meet.



Figure 32. Jason De Caires Taylor. *Vicissitudes*. (2006). Molinere Bay Sculpture Park, Grenada. The sculptures are a combination of ephemeral and permanent as they become coral reef creating habitat. Retrieved from www.underwatersculpture.com. Reprinted with permission.

Peter Von Teisenhausen is one of the best known eco-artists in Canada. His work, at times reminiscent of the approach of Goldsworthy, often has an ephemeral quality; is also often collaborative and exemplifies importance of place. Von Tiesenhausen's respectful relationship with nature permeates his work. People are also part of von Tiesenhausen's understanding and practice; they collaborate as viewers and participants. *Passages* (Figure 33) consisted of one hundred hand-sized boats carved, charred and painted, and filled with organic matter collected from the banks of the Bow River. They were dropped into the river by one hundred members of the community in June 2010 (Figure 33) in a ritual ceremony.



Figure 33. Peter Von Tiesenhausen. *Passages* (2010). Bow River, Alberta. One hundred people drop boats (right). An eco-art project that celebrates and collaborates with community.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles is another pioneer in the eco-art field. She is of interest as an artist who is involved in social, urban and human ecology. Her work is performance and social practice and she looks at the hard issue of garbage, putting herself right in the midst of it. Ten years after she began her work she was given an office/studio and is the only artist-in-residence at a city's sanitation department on record. She used the site as a place for advocacy and soon after began her piece *Touch Sanitation* (1979-80). If we are to look at art that improves our relationship with nature, a focus on garbage is an important connection.

Appendix B

A SHORT LIST OF HELPFUL RESOURCES

The following provide a good start to discovering and exploring eco-art.

- i) Watch *Rivers and Tides*, a video about the artist Andy Goldsworthy. This slow-moving but important piece will swiftly catapult anyone into understanding a form of eco-art or land art.
- ii) Watch at least one of many haunting but hopeful videos on youtube that document Jason deCaires Taylor's underwater sculpture. Perhaps start with this one:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrJJ4LgiePA>
- iii) If you are a school teacher, watch the youtube video, *Environmental Art* by Hilary Inwood. <http://youtu.be/3PhYowsFGNM>
- iv) The best website: Greenmuseum.org
- v) A great live experience is the Tree Museum in Gravenhurst, ON
- vi) For a Canadian eco-artist, check out community arts projects by Peter Von Tiesenhausen.
- vii) Check out WEAD, Women Environmental Artists Directory: weadartists.org.
- viii) If you are reading and thinking about eco-art, try doing it in some form . . . yourself.

