Discussion Around the Research Table (DART) II
Organized by Reiko Goto
Funded by IDEAS Research Institute and hosted by the team at On the Edge Research
Gray's School of Art, Robert Gordon University

Seminar Topic: Empathic Relationship with Ecological Art

Wednesday, 19th of May 2010 14:00-17:00

Room SB 01 at Scott Sutherland Building,

Robert Gordon University

Seminar Participants: Jonathan Baxter, Steve Brown, Tim Collins, Anne Douglas, Sarah Gittins, Reiko Goto, Steven Gray, Iain Irving, Alexandra Kokoli, Angela Lennon, Janet McEwan, Gerry O'Brien, Alexandra Ross, Merlyn Riggs, Dane Sutherland, Amanda Thomson, Chu Chu Yuan, Gilliam Wishart

The documentation was edited by Reiko Goto, June, 2010

Anne Douglas: ... In this relationship between, art and ecology, my personal view about these two presentations is that, even fifteen years ago, this would be an unlikely coming-together of different knowledges, different skills, and different concerns; I would ask what is the effect and potential of that coming-together. We're talking, very possibly, in the way that you were talking about the practice and knowledge of what goes into forestry which is so much deeper and greater than the thing that we look at, or what we assume, and then the work of the artist-ecologist who actually works with very scientific mechanisms, if you like, in order to go beyond the surfaces of the tree or the aesthetics of landscape to be able to construct a different sensibility.

These are kind of seismic shifts in what we think about, both in terms of content, and also in terms of art. This is the kind of understanding – that shift, I think, is one of the things we could begin to think about quite carefully.

0:01:35.9

Would you like to start with Steven?

Steven Gray: I am the Environmental Planner for Aberdeenshire Council. I went on producing over the [woodland] embankment scheme for the woodlands. In my past life I worked down in north-west England on woodlands in the Forest of Bowland and Arnside Silverdale areas of natural beauty and before then the River Mersey Basin Campaign at Salford and Warrington which is regenerating land and communities and the natural environments within the great industrial landscapes of north west England. I am quite interested in woodlands.

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One of the biggest things to get over is to pick up the people's relationship with the land and also try to pick up what the land's relationship is in terms of how the ecology is evolving. If you leave a piece of land behind, it changes. It is dynamic. It is fantastic. That is one of the reasons why I am here today.

0:02:33.1

Alexandra Kokoli: I am an art historian. I teach critical and contextual studies at Gray's School of Art. My research interest lies in contemporary art and contemporary conceptualism (very broadly defined). As regards to art and ecology, I don't have a specific interest in that – but why not? *[Laughter.]*

Merlyn Riggs: I am an artist and social worker. I am here to see what ecological art does, and how it creates relationships and partnerships in culture. I have been doing research about Joseph Beuys.

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Janet McEwan: I am a practising artist. Interestingly, I graduated from Gray's millions of moons ago and left the art world and got into environmental ... I worked with The Buchan Countryside Group which is based up in Buchan. I worked as an education officer. They were one of the first groups to get a long-term agreement set up between farmers – that was in the early '80s.

It is very interesting, for me, how, as you are saying, the world is coming together. I am really interested in ... I think the Harrisons [have a complex gestalt of all these works and former experiences.]

0:04:18.0

Now I've moved into community education. I am interested in educational processes and how to engage people. I am working on a project in Oldmeldrum which has a strong link with the ash trees.

I am here for a lot of reasons. I love things coming together. It is interesting.

0:04:41.2

Gillian Wishart: I'm bit like yourself. I come from lots of different angles. I am an architect and interested in building with natural materials including wood. I also have a small farm with diverse ecologies on it, including woodland and what was obviously ancient woodland some time ago (it even carries an ancient Gallic name) but is now open grassland. We're talking about changing landscapes: when we first went into, what is now, the SRDP, but originally Open Land Scheme which was encouraging

planting woodland. My conservator said, "Uh! Don't do that. All the groundcover is essential for woodland. You've actually now got species-rich grassland and that's even rarer than woodland – so, keep the grassland."

We're now actually gardening to stop the woodland coming back in. Actually, the deer are doing that quite well, but we are supposed to have cattle and things on there grazing to maintain what you could say is an artificial ecology because the natural [environment] is trees.

We are planting woodland on what was agricultural land – although not very good agricultural land. What we are going to reclaim from the diverse grassland, we've now got trees, and that relationship of planting trees where there were crops, and trying to keep the trees off where there were trees, is quite an interesting dynamic.

I am also interested in the relationship between countryside and trees and health and buildings and all the sort of scientific stuff on how the landscape affects people psychologically and physically.

Tim Collins: I am a visual artist. What interests me about all of this is the fact that trees are probably the most dynamic, most structurally significant living entity that we can collaborate with to transform the landscape. That idea dawned on me when Reiko and I were working in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

0:07:27.7

Artists have very few chances in life to affect the landscape in any significant way and it was through the relationship with trees, and by thinking about trees as partners in the aesthetic transformation of the landscape, that very curious things could happen. It also raises questions – there's a whole culture of questions.

Steven, you were talking about the farmers' bias. In Pittsburgh we used to laugh at the joke I would make that we were suffering from panoramic myopia: we had these great views from the hills and the ridges and, you know, the rivers edges were *obviously* green. If you went back twenty years, they weren't green. They were industrial; they were smoky; and stinky and a mess – but everybody was working. That was good. But everybody, when we first arrived, for the most part, the general

population believed that there was nothing of value. So the perfect question – part of the aesthetic question – was to pursue that need: how do you bring new value through artistic practice; how do you bring new value in the relationship between artistic practice and scientific quantitative method; what can you actually leave behind that has people thinking and taking action that they weren't taking before.

0:08:55.8

Iain Irving: I study at Gray's. I run an MA course. I am also a curator. I am quite interested in this because I am always interested in other places for artists to show their work rather than taking them to an institution or a museum. Putting them in the rural environment is very interesting [and a very difficult thing to grasp]. I want to hear both sides of the story as well, especially the institutions who might be the National Trust trying to work with art 1st because we have a lot to learn from each other.

0:09:45.8

In the MA course, I've done projects at Drum Castle and other places out with Aberdeen. The recent work we've done with MA students ... I am working with another colleague. She is looking at the sustainability of an artwork in a forest environment. The organisation that put it in there in the first place, now does not exist, so the work has been left in the woods to deteriorate because there is not any money to rebuild it or to take it back out again – it is just sitting there, waiting to deteriorate. She is looking at the deterioration of this work.

Gillian Wishart: This is interesting in itself, especially if it is made of natural materials, isn't it?

Iain Irving: Mostly, but some of it is metal and some of it is ... Our students – the MA students – start making work on top of the stuff that is already there which is quite interesting.

0:11:07.8

Gerry O'Brien: I'm here from Dundee. For me it is quite interesting because I started off doing a degree in biology. It is quite interesting to then get that turned round to something artistic. Then I retrained as a landscape architect.

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I think as landscape architects, we would think that we were purveyors of both these spheres of ecology and arts – but I don't think that we ever really get involved in either properly – so it is very interesting to me to see these two perspectives.

0:12:07.8

Jonathan Baxter: I am also from Dundee. I am very interested in art and ecology. I am an artist. I am involved in an art programme at the moment about developing public space which is very much about bringing ecology back into the city, or an awareness of urban ecology. That is one of my interests. Working access disciplines.

I suppose I am also very interested to draw on psychology and planning as well. I am interested in a broader scope in terms of ecology.

0:12:45.9

Alexandra Ross: I do a practice-led PhD in the drawing school in Dundee and I'm involved in an emergent group called 'Dare' from the artist in residence. Essentially, it is a meeting group that was started, …it must be for four months now. I am interested in curatorial practice. I have been working on different kinds of site-specific environments and introducing different people to different environments.

[People talking together.]

0:14:01.6

Sarah Gittins: I am a visual artist working in drawing, print-making, and I am particularly interested, at the moment, in the role of image-making in facilitating ecological consciousness.

0:14:26.5

Dane Sutherland: I am from Peacock Visual Arts. I share an interest in the dialogues and relationships of active environments and how we can engage each other.

Angela Lennon: I am from Peacock Visual Arts. We are doing an exhibition with Reiko next month, so this is the first of many discussions we are going to have around her work.

Amanda Thomson: I do a practice-led PhD in art and landscape at the University of the Highlands and Islands in the north of Scotland. My interest here is the relationship between working as an artist, and working with foresters, etcetera, etcetera – but also the different languages when you're looking at landscape and ecology the landscape of the north as a practice-led PhD. That is the nature of my own work and that is influenced by working in the public sphere.

0:15:42.5

Chu Chu Yuan: I am a visual artist. I am doing my practice-led PhD here at Gray's. My interest and research into art is a form of relational knowledge to see how art can develop different kinds of collaboration with people from different disciplines or different areas of work. My interest here would be to see what kind of conversations can emerge between visual arts and ecology and the environment.

0:16:15.5

Anne Douglas: That's great – thank you. Reiko, you have two questions that you want to pose to the group. Can you just talk us through that?

Questions:

The city of Aberdeen is 2819 square miles. In 1841 the population was 63,262, and in 1901 it became 153,503. The population is currently 213,810. What is the quality of relationship between human inhabitants and trees?

Last November Peter Robertson invited Dr. Walker to talk about climate change and our responsibility of energy use. At the end of her presentation she addressed the disciplines that would take an important role to change our behaviour: engineering, technology, architecture, politics, business, social

science and leadership. Behavioural change demands practical evaluative and mitigate response from the sciences. However it also demands a means to understand and value our changing environment from the arts and humanities. What are the current practices and future research questions that we bring to the table?

Steven Gray: We could talk about new ideas which didn't threaten the church and didn't threaten the rulers of your particular state or kingdom, otherwise you could very simply disappear, and art was a good way of doing that. Artists could express difficult ideas.

Art becomes change. It is getting people to think in terms of what actually important to them – what climate-change means to ourselves, our future selves, and to our children. Most of the debate is structured in terms of scientific angels-dancing-on-the-head-of-a-pin idea. What parts per million of carbon dioxide is reached or when do the trigger points kick in until it's irreversible. Not many people are saying, "Actually, this organism or plant can be disappearing some time soon – maybe in the next twenty years, or the next ten years.

From a Scottish point of view, you've got all the wonderful cultural legacies on the islands and they really are the sharp end the Western Isles and Orkney and places like that. The archaeology is just getting totally lost. People's crofts are getting washed away because they are exposed to the more frequent and the much more severely intense storms, but to the people living in the cities, and to the wider Scottish and UK nation, that is just something that happens in the background. You get in your car; you're dashing down a trunk road or the motorway; everything is business as usual until something happens like the floods or whatever, and then it's a moment of attention and focus, and it's gone again and you don't think about it.

Art is a great way to actually punch a hole in people's worlds and say, "This is what the big reality is." You only get to come to terms with this when you actually think about these things.

Gilliam Wishart: The last time the Harrisons were here some time ago we were talking about having to walk around the installation in their wellies. It wasn't beyond (as you say) the art to have any effect on the behaviour or perception of the 'change' –

let's call it that. It doesn't actually ... They don't make the link. What art has to do is to make that link between the way we live, which I think is important, and the consequences of that lifestyle and that is probably the important thing.

However, the impact is making that link between lifestyle and choices and decisions and the consequences of those decisions and the impact on the rest of the globe. That is the thing having to experience real floods whether in Huntly or the Lake District.

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Actually, it does not seem to have an effect. People say, "Oh dear. It's a problem. Maybe they should build higher walls" rather than, "What can I do to stop this happening next time? Maybe not get so many drains in the countryside."

Iain Irving: It makes an important effect, you remember the event happening.

Gilliam Wishart: But they don't make the link.

Iain Irving: But I am thinking, if you make art – like the event of those things – it may affect them. It is a sort of temporary thing, and it is not public art which they start to ignore and it starts to fade. Maybe there is slightly more impact in something that is much more temporary – and repeating that temporary event as well and therefore people's awareness is constantly updated or challenged.

Gilliam Wishart: But there is this image – on the news recently – this image of this Vietnamese girl who survived the napalm thing. It sounds simplistic, but it was a trigger and is continually repeated. We do say things like, "Wasn't that dreadful." But it doesn't appear to have stopped us having wars. It was very iconic photograph.

0:04:19.6

Anne Douglas: Do you have other example?

Steven Gray: There is an example I know of, coming back from the industry in Lancashire – that was a fantastic mill complex that was converted into residential, and one of the things is the developer wanted to take out was a big stone lintel on the door. They carved into the door lintel every time the river flooded. The mill which was driven by water in a little canal. It is on the side of the lintel was carved in really nice

lettering. The different floods: the 1805 flood. The 1825 flood, and this struck home. You sort of think, "It is down there, fifteen metres away. It is ten metres lower over there." At some point in the past it used to come up and flood this building. And the developer said, "No, no, no. We don't want that." And we said, "Yes, you do. It is a listed building. It is part of the cultural history of this place."

0:05:23.3

Tim Collins: There are three ways that artists can affect the world. One is through lyrical practices – poetic practices. They make us reconsider our day-to-day lives in new ways. There are critical practices where we're really embedded in philosophy and trying to get at what's wrong in the world, and then there are transformative practices which are actually about getting your hands into the world and creating a dialogue.

The trick is to create real potential for creative change. How do you actually shift the dominant cultural models from meaningless discourse – 'yes/no' decisions – towards long-term creative engagement in places and spaces.

I think art can do all of those things. The question is, how do we get better, smarter, quicker, faster doing this kind of stuff because we are really looking – if we care; if the arts can get beyond the kind of obsessive-compulsive need for freedom and self-expression; if we can find a moral and ethical role in the world – and this next fifty years is a really demanding time to do things differently – so, for me, as an artist and researcher, the questions are: How do I do it better? How do I do it smarter? How do I engage trees in new ways? How do I engage people in new ways? How do I fail gloriously – and write it up so that everybody else knows it, and once in a while get something right in your mind. Some of the questions I am curious about – particularly with the bunch of people we have in the room – how do we get there?

0:07:29.5

Jonathan Baxter: To pick up from that, I should reframe it a bit. In part, for me, I think, one of the issues is that if ... My own theory, my own sense, [is that art should forget its self-importance] – so we are not talking about art, or the arts, as though they are somehow some independent discipline or entity or practice.

For me the question that artists should ask is, who do they serve? It is not, in what way do they serve some theory of art, but it is more, who do they serve, and therefore, who are they working with? Where are they working? It re-pictures your practice in relation to community and, of course, content and place.

I think, for me, that is a useful starting point – to actually ask, "Who do I serve; what am I responsible to?" – and therefore to pitch my claim there.

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I think that addresses issues to do with this idea of transformative practice or critical discourse practice or whatever it is called because if we just think of the arts as though they somehow articulate any of those three themes, it is as though the arts are somehow neutral and not standing with a community of practice. For me, that is an issue about art and community.

Alexandra Kokoli: That is an important question, especially as we're just a few metres away from Gray's School of Art where our degree show is being sponsored by BP. We are genuinely very grateful for that money, but it raises that problem: can we afford to be strategically flexible in these relationships? How can we protect ourselves from being compromised, and where can we get money – perhaps.

Gilliam Wishart: For BP it is a form of affirmative action to make them look better.

Alexandra Kokoli: Of course. That is what they're getting out of it. If you think about it that way, we are actually very deeply implicated in such extremely dodgy dealings. *[Laughter.]*

But what is the alternative, really?

Gilliam Wishart: Even the Scottish National Trust – no, the Scottish Wildlife Trust – take money from BP – large sums from BP.

Man: We all have.

Merlyn Riggs: That is interesting, because we are complicit to all these things. We are all involved inter-connected and responsible. A cup of tea – where does it come from? I think it is interesting too, how we survive as an artist in an age when

increased specialisation is still the case in art professions. If we broaden out, is it difficult to find a position? I find it, anyway.

0:10:47.2

Anne Douglas: Can you actually use the identity of an artist?

Merlyn Riggs: I agree with collaboration and opening up, and not taking a stance, and not being the kind of sole genius and all of these things and being protective [of your professions]. Other professions are not necessarily working in the same manner. They are increasingly specialised. So what does that do to the artist? Where do we place ourselves?

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Steven Gray: The interesting thing about climate change issues is that nobody can see the big picture. You need people to help to synthesise and understand what the big picture is. Working with colleagues from the public art side of things – that is the interesting thing – bringing an artist into a design project to bridge that building of a public space. The artist is trying to synthesise things for you and act as a bridge between the different professions and the client as well, sometimes, you actually have quite a new twist and things because everybody else is sort of... As an artist, it gives you that a fantastic challenge.

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Merlyn Riggs: I actually tend to work in that way – fuzzing round the boundaries and the edges and trying to look at bridges and connections. That is normally what I do. It is just in response to what you're talking about. I was just being provocative, really.

0:12:20.8

Anne Douglas: In a way you are articulating what an artist does [which] is very classical – the idea that the visual artist, in some way, enables some kind of seeing, but I think the question then arises, when the artist moves into a collaborative relationship or sees a client other than an audience or an institution, is the issue of

how does the artist communicate that idea – that big picture, that vision – what are the means by which that becomes visible? So much then relies on a verbal exchange.

It is interesting – the Harrisons aren't here, but they very much use the gallery space – not as a commodity which is then shown to the public, but much more as a means to an end: as a means to articulate the metaphor and construct the big picture; construct the big time-frame.

0:13:37.9

It is still very classically the artist's world as enabling seeing. I think what we've got from the Eden 3 Project is not seeing, as much, as breathing or having access to the inside ...

Gilliam Wishart: A link. There is a woman who's done a soundscape of the Thames. She has gone up the Thames and she's playing it in Somerset House. She's got the soundscape of the Thames as an installation. Some of the things you hear are sounds from below water and above water, boats, birds, animals, trees – so you kind of get that. Does that change ... Is that just art? Or does that change the way we see the world and the way we behave in it?

Gerry O'Brien: Working as a landscape architect, often what we do is things like visual assessments. We're creating one at Dundee at the moment for a new power station – this kind of thing. There is a whole set of ... There is a methodology to do with assessment – visual assessment, landscape assessment. We're not just looking at, 'What does the place mean?', other than saying there is this percentage of green space ...

0:15:14.2

I look at this work and that involves planning. What you're bringing out, you're letting us see trees in a totally different way and what it can do. Can artists get involved in the planning of things and these decisions? I suppose, can you get involved in that way, because there is a gap.

Tim Collins: These are key questions. There is the question of the Harrisons using the gallery space. You raised the question of BP and, to go back to the north east

farmers – I think farming is a great metaphor. If you buy a property that's been abandoned for years – the first thing you do is figure out, what are the standing crops that are still viable; where are the best soils ... So you figure out all your relationships to nutrients and opportunities – and they're basically power relationships.

So, whether we're talking about BP and art – I'll use their money if I can put it to a better purpose than they are in the Gulf of Mexico. I'm happy to use the gallery if I can put it to a better use than the marketing of objects.

Basically, I think one of the fundamental questions is. We do want to affect the world. We also have to understand that the world demands certain power relationships. How do we, as social creative actors, bring some of the resources together to bear on those things that have real meaning?

0:16:59.4

Part of the resource that we bring together is the fact that we are together. Fifteen voices saying, "Dammit. Trees in the middle of Aberdeen with an art centre are more important than a concrete overpass. The Year 2000 Millennium Plan was a better plan than some of the plans that have been put forward." There is power in people.

Part of the question, for me, is always: How do we do what is unexpected? How do we take the tools and relationships that we have and take them to a higher and better purpose and, at the same time, stop all the trouble.

0:17:55.2

Alexandra Kokoli: I think we also subscribe to these things, but the question then becomes: What is different about what you are proposing to just a plain demonstration, and what role can art-making – art practice – play in [partaking] in that intervention? Of course, there is a long history of very successful and different integration of activism and art-making. So, how do we work with these traditions or develop new ones?

Tim Collins: Reiko will give you a copy of the Groundworks Catalogue. There are groups like WochenKlausur in Austria, Ala plástica, a group of artists down in South

America that is working on public-space issues after a totalitarian government in power ... There are exemplars in the art world that I think are brilliant.

0:19:35.4

Anne Douglas: It is a very important question. There is a certain fragility, I think, that happens when artists do stop making something that is recognisable as art. [_____] hundreds of years of certain ways of operating; certain value systems around those ways of operating. I think we've got locked into a very deterministic discourse in and around gallery only meaning commodity whereas it actually has meant a whole pile of other things that we're not necessarily talking about.

0:20:23.6

I was very struck, Gerry, when you talked about making assessments of the landscape – I don't know if this is true – if you are making assessments of the landscape as a landscape architect, what is driving that assessment or, perhaps more to the point, who is driving that assessment? Whose interest is driving that assessment?

Gerry O'Brien: You mean, if you've been asked to do it?

Anne Douglas: Yes. You described a landscape architect's practice of going to the landscape and making assessments – but an assessment is a selection of a viewpoint; a selection of a certain area of knowledge, or a certain kind of data ...

Gilliam Wishart: As Tim says, it is an assessment of power, isn't it?

Anne Douglas: And then, my next question was: What does it mean to get an artist involved in that process, and how does that interest in that assessment shift by the artist being present?

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Gerry O'Brien: Maybe I'm wrong – but I don't know if the artist can play this role. Institutionalized in most assessments there is a whole text on how to assess them which is built into the landscape institute – and that's the way it is. You can describe certain landscapes, and they can be characterised as what type of landscape it is, and that's the truth of it, and these involve planning decisions.

But I always wonder, because that's the way we've evolved as landscape architects – trying to turn it into a methodology. Obviously, it comes from our practice and our ideas of using all these things – it comes from those things, but I wonder if an artist could come in ... Maybe I'm wrong, but if they could come in and possibly talk about feelings of the place or history or our cultural history of a place or just view it from an artistic point of view and actually get involved in decision-making and it becomes something that is listened to – in that way. There seems to be a gap, I think.

0:22:51.2

I suppose it is something I see as a gap. Maybe I'm wrong. I'm just thinking an artist's practice is something that could be good, about getting into that and just ...

Tim Collins: That poses the question of strategic knowledge. What can you throw into the mix that has the potential to intellectually reorganise our common experiences in new ways.

Iain Irving: It would be great if people gave you the ok to do that because people like BP and other people are the gatekeepers. If things do go wrong, they use it as a marketing tool to say, "We are cleaning up."

0:25:00.3

Woman: Do you think art can contribute? In this powerful situation?

Iain Irving: Yes. It is, how do you get the job to actually make the decision? Do you get yourself in there, or do you try and work with parties that *will* help you to make the right decisions?

Gilliam Wishart: Is there not a role for these guys in terms of actually reversing the power dynamic, and saying, if you empower people, then they can start to make decisions.

[Talking together.]

Merlyn Riggs: If you want to engage, and enlightening, and educating would come into this conversation. As artists, we serve, and it is these people that we serve. It is

the public. It is not all experts. Sorry, I'm being very naïve, maybe, here – I don't know.

0:26:01.3

Chu Chu Yuan: I think that very interesting points have been brought up. I think that art can play so many different kinds of roles like conversations and a reminder of repetition of messages and specialised knowledge. I think art can contribute in so many different ways, but I think it is important to remember that we want to activate a kind of involvement from other people, or people in other fields.

0:26:40.2

The very basic, crucial questions are always, "What has it got to do with me; how am I in the picture?" In a way, I think artists have to consider, "How do we put the viewer *into* the picture", which links it with what you are saying, "How do we create that link to what people can do?"

In order to do that, I think we need create less space or different space. I think that is probably reflection. Maybe the person can think, "Ok, what has this got to do with me?" But I think it is also a kind of immersion. You need to immerse that person. A lot of things are like 'show and tell'. Artists can flag up certain things and can draw up wonderful metaphors to scare people or to put fear in their hearts – but still, it doesn't activate that involvement, you know.

0:27:27.3

I think activation is ... I'm trying to find out what *can* bring about that collaborative relationship. I think it has to be modelled – I won't say 'serving' – it is more an equal thing based on a kind of identified, common interest or need or concern.

I'm sure the issue impacts you in a different way than it impacts me and concerns you in a different way than it concerns me – but it is there something that we want to do together?

But again, this space, I think it needs to incorporate a kind of doing or making – a kind of common activity which is like narrow – something in common because it

needs to involve the body, not just the mind. It's like making, doing, smelling, touching – all the senses need to get involved.

0:28:19.0

Reiko Goto: I agree – the making is really important. I think it is really interesting in Scotland right now – it is making; it is happening. The country is looking for new landscape. That is what they try to envision. What is the landscape in Scotland which includes rivers, streams, air, soil, water, and the trees. What kind of trees? Scots Pine is very important and beautiful – but if everything becomes Scots Pine, how do you feel? How about other trees? How about diversity?

0:29:04.6

Anne Douglas: There was something in your presentation about how plastic the landscape was; how what seems to be ancient landscape was not really ancient, and how so much of what we are experiencing in terms of landscape is determined by utilitarian interests.

So, Reiko, as a Japanese person – her perception of Scotland is, is Scotland searching for a non-utilitarian landscape, or is Scotland searching for a meaningful landscape?

0:29:51.7

Steve Brown: The idea of Scotland as ancient – in fact, the rocks are some of the oldest rocks in the world – it is a very stable, very old country. It doesn't move around much; you don't get many earthquakes; it is bound by the rock system and it is much more stable. The Japanese have actually solidified the landscape by keeping it well-planted with trees to stabilise the top. Take the trees away and you would have an ecological disaster in Japan as you have in New Zealand. You wouldn't get that in Scotland just because it is a different system. It is much older; you get these peat developments in the north-east, for example. "It is a disaster", my mum used to say.

0:30:35.6

To change that last bit is quite difficult. We are bound by landscape character assessments as we are in this area. The whole of Deeside has been character-assessed,

so it gives you an idea of what it should look like – it is a natural idea, if you like. It is not that flexible, or the perception is that it can't be that flexible. It has to be Scots Pine [by virtue, they say]. That's the only thing [they do there], but I'm not sure if that is correct.

0:31:16.7

Anne Douglas: What is informing that?

Steven Gray: Natural vegetation; scientific analysis of the soil ...

[Talking together.]

0:31:56.1

Steve Brown: There is a connection there with the land, but not a lot.

Tim Collins: I'm just starting to read about Scotland and some of the programmes that you have in place. Now, [Steven] came up with the Native Woodlands Discussion Group which is interesting. It is a group of people involved in important landscapes in Scotland who enter into a democratic discourse – a critical discourse in a lot of ways that helps rethink nature in places like the Trossachs.

One of the things I started reading about is, you've got community forests here in Scotland which are intended to enable people to actually restore and manage. Is it a successful programme? Is that a tool that can be used in a cultural shift in a place like Aberdeen? Is there funding behind it?

0:33:00.6

Steve Brown: It is a feudal system in Scotland. It is bureaucratic because you need to ask permission to do things. I can't actually plant trees. I have to get permission. You need the landowner's consent.

Ownership of land is very important. People should, I suppose, own land, or communities should own land, so that they can identify that area of land. Permission to plant trees is only necessary for areas over 5 hectares generally and 1 hectare in sensitive sites. Sitka spruce is a tree for large plantations managed by specialists who

can handle large machinery. Local communities should concentrate on growing native trees that are easier to handle and have a wide range of uses and benefit both wildlife and the landscape.

0:34:07.9

I think community work is quite new. There is this ownership problem which is more a land reform thing, I think. To get round that problem, some of these big estates should be broken up.

Steven Gray: There is also that cultural association. As you say, if you go past the nineteenth century – especially in this part of the world. A lot of the timber came in from Scandinavia. The ships came from Scandinavia laden with timber and they sailed back again with goods manufactured in Scotland. So the cultural connection with the community woodland has to be re-established. You have to support it as not just a place of beauty or a place for recreation, but a place of shared resources whether it is timber; whether it is game; etcetera.

0:34:57.9

Steve Brown: They need to be open-minded. Sometimes, I think, art is just a bit self-indulgent. People like that can't always see what they're getting at. Maybe it should be simpler. A simple message is the best way.

Tim Collins: Do I understand correctly that the community woodland requires utilitarian values in the intent, rather than intrinsic values or the aesthetic values of having a woodland and does that indicate a lack of thoughtfulness in the economic models that inform this community woodlands?

Steven Gray: Yes. *[Laughter.]*

Steve Brown: No…

Steven Gray: I think the idea is, community woodlands are all things to all people. Effectively, you have to be utilitarian and the bottom-line of 'utilitarian' is the space you get. You go back to a model which is developed right across the British Isles and the rest of Europe whereby you have a mixture of trees and a diversity of tree species,

and that allows you to manage trees effectively on a rotation basis. Instead of planting, the trees are effectively managed just the way would farm, but managed in different ways and so some of the trees are cut every four years; some of the trees you just take their branches off; some of the trees are coppiced right down to the ground because they will grow back again providing you keep the deer out; and some of the trees might remain. There is a whole range of uses and activities. But they are all utilitarian. That means the process and it could be a whole range of practices. Some can be quite spiritual as well.

0:36:50.9

Woman: [I'm based in Cornwall.] I've just done a project quite recently making art – [skin boats out of hazel and canvas] at Donegal. One of the things that I've learned while gathering hazel – coppicing hazel ... Apparently (I hope this is right), if you go along the hedges (there is a lot of hazel hedges) – it is a crime for the landlord to neglect these hedges. They are neglected, but therefore you are allowed – anybody can take from those hedges because it is their form of maintaining these hazel hedges, but people don't know this. It is not common knowledge. People think you can't take from the hedges because they're stealing because it is someone else's property but, in fact, there is an ancient law (I hope I'm right) that you can take because the landowners are breaking the law. They're not maintaining this resource, because it was such a valuable resource in the past.

0:37:58.8

Reiko Goto: It is interesting – the choices about the future of the landscape. Tim and I went on a tour in the Trossachs which is a drinking watershed for Glasgow. There are some two-hundred- year old trees there – different types. The interesting part was that people were saying, if we stop the sheep, then the trees will come back – the small baby birch trees are coming back. Their root systems are much older than [eight] years. [Eight] years ago they stopped having sheep in the landscape, but the root systems were already established for [fifteen] years, so it looks like miniature woodland. Some people are saying, how about bringing cattle so that their hooves will break down the brackens. There are so many brackens and heather – what will happen about these lands if farmers bring cattle in – what would happen? Even the

scientists are saying, how about no sheep and no cattle, and just leave it alone. What will happen?

0:39:29.3

There are many choices. I would just like to go back to the art a little bit because, because if I start talking about trees, I sound like a tree-hugger! I talked about the Joseph Beuys and then in imitation to the German culture and oak trees. Lots of artists – not only painters, but also poets and writers – they all try to create the image of the oak land. It is not just Germany – every culture has that [kind of cultural creation by artists].

Artists have some roles to create what kind of nature we would like to have in the future. We have that role. I think, more importantly, Helen and Newton use museums and galleries as a meeting place – not just for having small conversations, but talking about many different issues [deeply].

0:40:30.1

I think a gallery [and museum] can be a wonderful place because it is not set in certain ways. It is a place to talk about diverse opinions. We need those kinds of places. [in my presentation] I talked about a dead-centre[1], having a space like that – open to people to talk freely about our environment and ecologies and the future of the landscape is extremely important.

Again, more people and more money, it [the place] becomes more and more like a dead-centre. It is not just about planting trees. We need to think about how we are connected to each other. We are not just 'tree people' or planting trees. Somehow we try to survive altogether.

0:41:23.5

Anne Douglas: Angela, would you like to respond to that?

Angela Lennon: In a gallery, the idea of having art as the object is not how I would see Reiko's project at all, but it is about facilitating things – having the space to

[1] If plants are too densely growing they might create a dead zone in the middle. (Akira Miyawaki, *Plants and Human* (1970). NHK Books, Tokyo Japan, p. 54.)

facilitate discussion with public and as a place for the public to come. We have had quite a lot of discussion about how that would come about and, obviously, to have something as exciting to come and see and not just being a demonstration of different kinds of experiments. That was quite an interesting conversation that we had to get to that point – how will the public interact with Reiko's work.

0:42:06.7

It is not quite a 'show and tell', but it is about discussions. I don't think collaborating with other people is necessarily a challenge. I think, if you've got an interest, it happens naturally and I've seen that happen time and time again with many artists working with many different fields.

0:42:29.5

Iain Irving: So is marketing important? As we found out from other organisations, marketing is very important because, what you're not getting there is the general public. How do you get more of the gallery-going public to go and see something ...

Angela Lennon: Obviously, marketing is a challenge all the time, but I think if artists do have an interest ... The gallery has done lots of work, we should get people who don't normally come to a gallery or are normally involved in art.

0:43:07.7

It has to be the nature of the project and the artist themselves that engages people and then re-challenge that to try and reach a wider public.

Iain Irving: Yes – well, that is the problem. If the artist is in the gallery, that is fantastic. But how do you get that message out of the gallery? You're working directly in the public field in different ways. Is that still just part of the public that you are gaining their attention – people who walk their dogs and have no [interest] in art?

Angela Lennon: Yes, it is the continual challenge of how to bring new people to the galleries.

Iain Irving: Yes, but the gallery – obviously the context is the art content so it is not so problematic. But obviously, if you take it out of that context, it becomes problematic for the public. Or does it?

Angela Lennon: I'm not sure it does.

Gerry O'Brien: I know it doesn't. That's the thing.

0:44:13.3

Jonathan Baxter**:** I would like to respond to that. Another thing to think about is Tim's idea that somehow artists can essentially reorganise common experience – how we decentre art; how we take it out ... I'm not saying either gallery space or woodlands. If I wanted to learn anything about ecology, I would be better off spending the year with you than I would be going into Arnolfini Gallery and looking at a show that they were involved in not so long ago.

0:44:52.7

I think, the idea of reorganising common experience – there is still a presumption that artists have something to teach in a particular way. The idea of how we would decentre or frame common experience as an everyday practice and recognising what's been co-opted by aesthetics; what it is to feel the lightness or vitality or heightened interest or pleasure – these things are accepted as 'beauty' in traditional painting – how do you reframe that.

At the moment there will be lots of people walking on the beach; there will be people gardening; there will be people ... How they are taking ownership of what we are talking about as an art practice, I think is absolutely fundamental.

Art spaces still exist, but they are an historical phenomenon in that they fall away. So, how we reposition what we mean by practice-led experience, I think, is absolutely key about it.

0:46:00.2

Tim Collins: There is also the thing of the gallery as an infrastructure. We lost the most important infrastructure, I think, for creative research-oriented public art spaces like the Peacock that are open-minded and wanted to do difficult work.

So part of it is the infrastructure. The other part of it is the practice. You're talking about social practice – we've been involved with three- to five-year projects – long-term projects. Part of the problem with that work is process the stuff isn't always there. It is different than somebody that works in a more studio-orientated environment.

0:47:14.4

Part of the curatorial challenge, and part of the critical challenge, is how does the artist clarify their intention? The subsequent questions are, how do you present it? How do you critique it? One of the things I am doing right now is, I'm going back and looking at some of the international exhibits in ecological art. If you look at the critical discourse, – they are caught up with what they see on the wall as the finite thing to respond to, yet there is a whole process narrative behind the work that is incredible. *[Background noise.]*

0:47:57.5

There are a couple of examples. [The show at the Barbican] actually has [unwound] all the critical discourse connected to it. People just aren't [embedding] in some works that occurred between three to ten years – so how do you get around that critical perspective and how do you present it; how do you sustain it from an artistic perspective; how do you integrate it with real-world things; and how do you develop a research culture that [pushes it] to get smarter and better?

0:48:43.7

Gilliam Wishart: Can you define what you mean by 'people in ecological art'? I would think somebody like Capability Brown or even – God forbid – the Eden Project could be described as 'people of ecological art' – and you're not putting that on the wall. I have no idea how you could curate it and, actually, does it matter whether you curate it or not?

Alexandra Kokoli: But if art is everything – there is nothing.

Gilliam Wishart: That is not what I am saying.

Alexandra Kokoli: I know.

Gilliam Wishart: I'm still thinking… because the conversation moved on, but if you actually involve people and had their art (if you want to call it that) in the Peacock, they would come in to see each other's work, and that would bring them over that boundary. I'm sure you've done that. People come and see their own, and their friends', and their neighbours', and their children's work, but they won't come and see somebody they've never heard of and actually couldn't care less about. It may be on the way that they actually stumble across something else interesting and say, "Hey, this is good."

0:49:56.5

I've done that myself with self-building projects, and people start to get involved in building and what building is about; and what architecture is in the broader sense (I don't mean the classical sense) is about. And that widens their horizon because they actually become physically, mentally, emotionally involved in the building and they're creating their own space and that enlarges their perceptions and their interests beyond that.

0:50:29.5

Anne Douglas: But you are not asking architects to abandon their practices and their art.

Gilliam Wishart: Yes, I am. *[Laughter.]*

[Talking together.]

Gilliam Wishart: We've been doing that for the last thirty years!

Anne Douglas: Do spaces change where you take the artwork and the gallery away or you put different things in, and actually, you haven't changed anything.

What I suggest, which I think is a big challenge, is actually the positioning of the artist in relation to social and cultural meaning by actually removing part of the focus from the reduction of the object into, and away from, the institutionalised spaces for art. Actually, a lot of things happen in that process.

One is invisibility. The second is the struggle with power-sharing – what is it that we doing here; what is our role here; and how is it specific and not just a space involved with a social worker or some other educational practice? In a way I think there is not enough discourse in and around that – that specificity. What is this art? And tough questions – is it, or isn't it, art; and what is in this?

0:52:10.7

It might have been art. Where is the aesthetics? How does the whole nature of the aesthetics change?

Alexandra Kokoli: Or anti-aesthetics, but some discourse engaging in the question of aesthetic is absolutely central to any kind of art practice – even negating it – is central.

Chu Chu Yuan: Sorry. I think the whole idea of conversation or dialogue is that we don't undo what we know. We don't negate our practice. Actually, we bring with us the knowledge that we have and then we try to build on that. I do think that art does have a specific kind of knowledge and is, in a way, to make us see certain kinds of relationship of visualising certain things as a whole or as a part, or placing it in a specific way. I think it does have a specific role to facilitate that – but then, with a kind of conversation or a kind of joint discovery is very important. A joint process. Everybody has to feel that they want to work together otherwise it doesn't work.

0:53:35.4

Tim Collins: The aesthetic dialogue has moved on in incredible ways. From Bourriad to Kester – the whole notion of discursive aesthetics ... Environmental studies are raising some interesting issues that take us right back to the subject/object separation which takes us back to Scheller and Schiling. The function of art as a socially-embedded practice with essential relationships to the most important ideas

about subjectivity of the day. I think there are really important questions that quite often get left behind in a kind of popular understanding of aesthetics.

Alexandra Kokoli: Popular or populist – what do you mean?

0:54:39.1

Tim Collins: I would say 'popular' because it is not populist. It's high modernism – this notion of a laboratory with four white walls and an object where the intention is clear – you know what you're looking at; you relate it back to specific practices and specific traditions.

Alexandra Kokoli: I don't think that either Anne or myself are actually preparing for this kind of aesthetics.

Tim Collins: All I'm suggesting is that the aesthetic discourse, at this point of time, is incredibly broad and it's much broader than it's been at any time in the last hundred years – I would argue.

Anne Douglas: Perhaps one could argue that it [_____] – that it is actually not addressing that issue of clarity [_____] [_____]. It actually needs to be more specific, rather than [_____] or more all-embracing [_____] – less clear, in a way. We're digging really deep down into an aesthetic discourse.

We've run past our time, but I think just before we finish, I think Reiko has a small presentation to make.

0:56:08.5

Reiko Goto: Yes! By the way, it is important. We are recording this conversation and will have it transcribed and put on the web. I hope you guys don't mind that. Thank you so much, and I hope that we can keep talking, and next time bring more stories from outside. I'm going to listen to the trees to hear what they're saying.