Thinking through the Anthropocene: Arts & Sustainability Residency 2016 Report
Introduction

“Human activity has been a geologically recent, yet profound, influence on the global environment. The magnitude, variety and longevity of human-induced changes, including land surface transformation and changing the composition of the atmosphere, has led to the suggestion that we should refer to the present, not as within the Holocene Epoch (as it is currently formally referred to), but instead as within the Anthropocene Epoch”

Lewis and Maslin, 2015

Arts & Sustainability Residency context

“CCS’s Arts & Sustainability Residency is becoming a major intersection point for artists and the most significant thinkers in sustainability.”

Chris Fremantle, independent arts producer, writer & researcher

Since 2014, Creative Carbon Scotland (CCS) has run its Annual Arts & Sustainability Residency with the aim of providing Scotland-based artists from a range of backgrounds and disciplines with the space and stimuli to consider how their practices relate to the complex questions and challenges associated with environmental sustainability and climate change.

The residency has become a cornerstone of our work which supports the development of artistic practices in Scotland and builds new connections between artists, cultural organisations and those working in areas related to environmental sustainability. It sits within culture/SHIFT: a framework for our projects and initiatives which aim to better understand how artistic practices can contribute to the wider cultural shift towards a more environmentally sustainable society.

This year, we received over 100 applications to the residency, making it our most popular yet, and were afforded the opportunity to work with two of the top practitioners in their fields: Professor Jan Bebbington (University of St Andrews) and Lex ter Braak (Van Eyck Institute, Maastricht).

2016 Residency aims

• To offer a high quality opportunity for artists from a range of disciplines, who may or may not have previously worked in this area, to learn from one another and develop their understanding of the relationship between their practice and the Anthropocene;

• To explore the ways in which cultural practices of artists can re-express the scientific, social and philosophical ideas and concepts associated with the Anthropocene and the transition to a more sustainable future;

• To build participating artists’, partners’, and Creative Carbon Scotland’s understanding of the connections between individual creative practices and climate change, and their role in effecting wider social change in the transition to a more sustainable society.

The residency is deliberately designed to not require any artistic outputs during or immediately following the residency, but rather to provide the stimuli, time and connections which contribute towards the longer-term development of artistic work and intersection with those working in sustainability.

This longer-term impact is demonstrated in 2014 and 2015 participants’ continued engagement in this area and new cross-disciplinary collaborations which have emerged with other participants.
Equalities, diversity and inclusion

Participants were paid a fee of £450 in line with Scottish Artist Union rates for their attendance of the residency and all food and travel expenses were covered.

Creative Carbon Scotland has a rigorous Equalities Policy and we welcome applications from artists in line with the ‘protected characteristics’ named in the Equality Act 2010. This includes: age, disability, gender reassignment, income, marriage or civil partnership status, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation, socio-economic deprivation.

Project Partners

The 2016 Arts & Sustainability Residency was run in partnership and co-hosted at Cove Park Artist Residency Centre on the Rosneath Peninsula, Argyll and Bute.

The programme was supported by Creative Scotland and the Dr David Summers Charitable Trust.

Our thanks also to Asif Khan, Director, Scottish Poetry Library and Jackie Crichton, Administration and Communications Coordinator, Playwrights’ Studio, Scotland for their involvement in the artist selection committee.

“The ‘Thinking through the Anthropocene: Arts & Sustainability Residency’ was, for me, an enriching experience. I learned about an important concept and met new people working in similar fields who shared my concerns about our environment. This was important for me as I had felt quite isolated; not knowing many politically-engaged artists.”

Simon Gall
music, community arts, participatory arts
Facilitators

**Professor Jan Bebbington**
*University of St Andrews, Scotland*

Jan Bebbington works on a variety of sustainable development issues (especially climate change and biodiversity loss) with the aim of understanding how change happens in the pursuit of sustainable development outcomes. Her work is centred on the various roles that organisations can play in this context while also understanding the impact of governance, markets, incentives, individuals and culture in such transitions.

**Lex ter Braak**
*Director, Van Eyck Institute, Maastricht, Netherlands*

Lex ter Braak is currently the Director of the Van Eyck Institute, a post-academic institute for artistic development with an international outlook, located in Maastricht. The core values that the Van Eyck aspires to are meeting, connection, cooperation, engagement and process. From 2000 he was director of the Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture in Amsterdam. Previously he was director of the Vleeshal in Middelburg. He is a freelance writer/critic on literature and fine art.

Artists

**Reem Alkayyem**
*architecture, design*

Reem has practiced architecture for 15 years in her home country of Syria and has MScs from the University of Edinburgh in Architectural Project Management (2012) and Advanced Sustainable Design (2016). She aims to enhance and disseminate the knowledge of sustainability to include the social and cultural aspects in addition to environmental. She is additionally keen to contribute to the reconstruction of her country and to educate future architects on sound and sustainable bases.

**Kathy Beckett**
*visual arts, craft, design, community arts, participatory arts*

Kathy describes her creative practice as ‘in exploration of ecocentric approaches’, seeing that her responsibility and passion as an artist is to help serve a more beautiful, life sustaining world. She works across a range of mediums, with people and nature at the core of her activity and, public engagement as a vehicle of expression. She has been contracted as a project artist concerned with environmental sustainability for a range of organisations, including the Glasgow School of Art, Creative Carbon Scotland and North Light Arts.

**Simon Gall**
*music, community arts, participatory arts*

Simon is a musician, composer, educator based in Aberdeenshire. He has toured (and continues to tour) internationally, recording with a number of artists including well-known world music band Salsa Celtica, Cuban band Son al Son and more recently contemporary Scottish folk duos Clype.

**Alex Mackay**
*music, digital*

Alex is a sound artist, composer and performer based in Glasgow, making work across media including sound/music, image and performance for a wide range of contexts, including recorded media, installation and live performance as well as collaborative work in the fields of visual art, dance and film.

**Victoria MacKenzie**
*literature*

Victoria is a fiction writer working on her first novel, Brantwood, about the life of art critic and social reformer John Ruskin, as well as a short fiction collection, *Creaturely*, which explores our connections with other species.
Michael Stumpf
visual arts
Michael is a visual artist who works primarily in sculpture. In addition to his own practice he is currently a member of the artist group Poster Club. Recent exhibitions include: New Wheat New Mud New Machine (with Posterclub) Cooper Gallery, Dundee; Objects Converse on a Matter of Mutual Concern, Art Across the City, Swansea; This Song Belongs to those Who Sing It, Mackintosh Gallery, Glasgow School of Art; In Other Words, Lewis Glucksmann Gallery, Cork; New Alchemy /Contemporary Art after Beuys, Landesmuseum, Münster.

Samuel Tongue
poetry
A hybrid of lyric and language poetry, Samuel’s practice is inter-medial and parasitic, living within, feeding from, and provoking a variety of artistic forms. Poems are search patterns, part of a meshwork of ideas and concepts, rooted in an incorrigibly plural world.

Jenna Watt
theatre
Jenna is a multi-award winning Scottish theatre maker, her latest work, Faslane, written in part at Cove Park, received a 2016 Scotsman Fringe First Award at this year’s Edinburgh Fringe.

Creative Carbon Scotland

CCS Director, Ben Twist, and Producer, Gemma Lawrence, participated in and co-ran the residency with the facilitators and Cove Park, developing their own thinking and contributing their ideas and knowledge around the connections between artistic practices and environmental sustainability.

“CCS created a space where artists were not under pressure to produce new work, however, this hothouse of ideas organically gave way to inspiration, learning and forward planning. This allowed for a thorough reflection on creative practice and I left the residency feeling enriched, reassured and, in question of my working practices – all alongside a new, and growing, understanding of what my practice is about. I found it to be a transformative learning experience and I am excited to see where these new connections and understandings will lead.”

Kathy Beckett
visual arts, craft, design, community arts, participatory arts
Programme overview

Friday

Introductions to one another and the site
Based within Cove Park’s new Artists Centre, we began the weekend with an introduction to the site: its history including previous uses as a landfill site, a petting zoo and tea shop, its more recent incarnation as the artist residency centre, as well as future plans for use of its 50 acres of land. This layered past provided a helpful analogy to begin our discussions concerning the Anthropocene.

Through our initial introductions from this year’s participants some recurring themes and questions emerged, including:

• The false ‘nature/culture’ divide which the Anthropocene can simultaneously question or remove, and reinforce;
• Political engagement of the arts, making change happen;
• Hope vs gloom and doom;
• Avoiding didactic work: opening up questions and therefore allowing for changing awareness rather than raising awareness;
• Materiality, use of tools and technology, production processes in art making;
• Developing new forms of practice, making and collaboration which reflect the time we live in.

The issues
The issues map is represented below. The four surrounding ‘bubbles’ are aspects that emerged during the discussion that are relevant to participants motivations and concerns. The central bubble emerged from these concerns and related to what we might need to ‘keep an eye on’ during the residency.

The context
[nature-culture; the mess we have made]

The structures
[politics-relationships to place-language]

The mean
[hectoring-persuading-conversations (with not to)-bottom up/top down]

The emotions
[(active) hope-doom-frustration]
Saturday

MORNING

Understanding the Anthropocene
On the Saturday morning Jan provided us with an overview of current science and literature concerning the Anthropocene, as well as her professional experience researching and working with governments and organisations on sustainable development.

Jan led us through a number of central themes and her perspective on some of the resulting questions including:

- From the outset, the Anthropocene has been used both in the science of stratigraphy and as a metaphor;
- Contested starting points of the Anthropocene (currently ranging from the birth of agriculture via the colonisation of the New World and the industrial revolution to the partial test ban on the nuclear bomb) and the social/political implications that follow from each being chosen as the starting date;
- Defining of an origin within the 1610–1945 timeframe is likely a red herring, we are trying to define it too soon and this timeframe, and the events within it, would be bundled into one event within the vast geological timescale;
- The Anthropocene is a social as much as a scientific construct and therefore you define its origin because of what you want to do with it;
- While it is natural for our attention to be turned towards the epoch to come (the Anthropocene) what the end of the Holocene might entail has not been as well developed. There are concerns, however, that the end of the Holocene is likely to be characterised by inequality and rapid ecological shifts.

For a good summary of the research debates concerning the origins of the Anthropocene see Lewis & Maslin’s (2015) paper ‘Defining the Anthropocene’.

Institutional thinking
We heard some initial responses from Lex and Catrin on the institution’s role in relation to environmental sustainability. Lex shared the Van Eyck’s recent plans for a new lab, which enables artists to explore questions related to ecology and urban development.

We asked what it would be like if all arts institutions held a space within their programme for considering climate change and sustainability.

AFTERNOON

Group responses and discussion
In the afternoon we broke into smaller groups to work through and further explore key topics. Questions discussed included:

- Considering the relationship between art and politics, including examples of either historic censorship or use of artistic work for political means;
- How does the Anthropocene provoke new forms of making work? How could this encompass multiple perspectives and voices (both human and non-human)?
- How does the Anthropocene shape what we value, culturally?

Saturday was rounded off with a short presentation from Gemma and Ben on the history of the CCS and our aims in supporting the development of artistic work in connection with those working in areas concerning environmental sustainability including the development of the culture/SHIFT programme.

This was used as a precursor for Monday morning when we would discuss next steps and future plans.
Sunday

MORNING

Who owns the artist?
Reflecting on Saturday’s discussions, Lex began the Sunday with the topic of the artist’s role in society, framed through the question of who owns the artist?

In doing so, he outlined the driving forces behind the creation of artistic work in the western canon through different historical periods and social/political movements from the ancient Greeks onwards.

In more recent history, he highlighted groups such as the Frankfurt School of artists, thinkers and philosophers which emerged during the interwar period, concerned with the conditions that would allow for social change, and which many contemporary artists are re-addressing themselves to.

In particular, Lex discussed the unresolved concern about ‘artistic freedom’ and fear of instrumentalisation of art. Whilst acknowledging that the artist has never operated in a vacuum, he emphasised that the artist has to choose their own way, being true to themselves through the work that they make.

Commissioning exercise
With this in mind, Lex set participants the task of developing and pitching an outline proposal for a fictional commission, worth £100,000, which explored the theme of the Anthropocene and deep time.

The exercise provided the opportunity for everyone to apply their ways of thinking and practice to the ideas we had been discussing, in a ‘quick and dirty’ fashion, and served the role of a practical activity without limiting participants to a particular artform or approach.

Without going into the detail of the proposals, ideas explored included:

- Developing narratives to include multiple layers of voices for human and non-human in the past, now and in the future;
- Happenings in particular sites to catalyse participants’ understandings of deep time, alongside current land use decisions such as fracking;
- Researching and gaining understanding from experts in diverse fields;
- Exploring the development of musical genres during the colonial period through the lens of the Anthropocene;
- Considering methods of sculptural object production including the use of the workshop environment as a means of exploring the origins of materials.

AFTERNOON

Visit to Linn Botanical Gardens
On Sunday afternoon, the opportunity of a tour of Linn Botanical Gardens by garden keeper Jim Taggart, provided a provocative analogy to our discussions. Described by writer Philip Hoare as a ‘heady combination of science and aesthetics, an art work in itself’, with over 400 plant species from around the world, Linn Gardens is an embodiment of the interconnected human and non-human world which the Anthropocene posits.

In our walk around the garden and during a silent walk back to Cove Park, participants were asked to use the physical experience to reflect upon the ideas and learning that they had taken from two days of discussion for sharing that evening.

EVENING

Reflecting on the weekend
On the Sunday evening we discussed participants’ initial reflections and what they would be taking away for further consideration. We covered:

- The role of the artist is to frame questions and to ask questions in a different way, not necessarily to answer them;
- Affirming the potential of artistic practices in being part of the transition towards environmental sustainability, as one of the participants, Sam Tongue, said ‘we make the things that make us’.
Monday

Theories of change
Leaving us with some parting thoughts, Jan shared with the group her theory of change, based partly on Foucault’s notion of ‘governmentality’. Summarised, in order for change to come about there needs to be:

1. Creation of a shared belief that there is a reason for change, e.g. problematisation of the status quo;
2. A belief in a plausible (but currently unrealised) vision of the future;
3. An articulation of how we might move from the problem situation to a future vision (this shift includes many aspects which develop together – substantive material change supported by wider culture change).

She highlighted that having a robust theory of change can give practical hope. We discussed how there are roles for artists within all three of those strands.

Learning from examples
Ben also highlighted the work of sociologist, David Byrne², who sees the analysis of case study examples as an important tool for understanding how change can come about within complex systems.

One thing that came out the weekend was the need for a resource that holds examples of artistic practices working in this area, for others to learn from and build on. CCS has now started building a series of useful case studies for others to learn from.

CCS’s role
We talked about CCS’s role in taking the discussions of the weekend forward. These included:

- Playing a brokering role between artists and sustainability experts and institutions, helping to set the right terms for the ways in which artistic practices can contribute to environmental sustainability contexts;
- Supporting and facilitating commissioning opportunities for the development of new artistic work in this area with other cultural organisations;
- Continuing to create opportunities for learning and knowledge/practice exchange such as the residency and Green Tease events.
- Making the most of artists’ curiosity and readiness for the unknown within the context of the challenges surrounding issues such as climate change.

“The residency was a hugely valuable experience which allowed me a rare opportunity to come together with a diverse range of artists and consider a topic that is already very important to my practice, but in ways I have never approached it before.”

Alex Mackay
music, digital
Future work

Evaluating the role of the Arts & Sustainability Residency

The Arts & Sustainability Residency fits within CCS’s longer term aims of building an arts & sustainability community of practice in Scotland which contributes to a wider cultural shift towards a more sustainable society.

In 2017, a follow up event which gathers participants’ feedback on the impact that the 2014, 2015 and 2016 residencies are having on their practices will be used to evaluate the longer-term benefits of the residency and to disseminate learning and discussions with our wider arts and sustainability networks.

culture/SHIFT: Connecting artistic practices and environmental sustainability

Throughout 2016, we focused on building stronger connections with people working in areas related to environmental sustainability including universities, NGOs, environmental agencies and policy makers.

Taking inspiration from artists such as Frances Whitehead in Chicago and projects such as Watershed+ in Calgary, we aim to take this a step further in 2017 by contributing to a number of projects which further understandings of the roles of artistic practices in such contexts. In fact, in early 2017, we’ll be working with Frances Whitehead by running an Embedded Artist Project seminar with Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design in Dundee with participants from relevant regeneration agencies and from the arts sector. This aims to stimulate the development of an Embedded Artist Project in Scotland.

More widely, in 2017 we aim to support a number of projects under the culture/SHIFT umbrella, which create new opportunities for artists to collaborate directly with those working in areas related to environmental sustainability.

Through these projects we will consider how collaboration between cultural and sustainability areas could contribute to the following:

• Approaching the complex questions and wicked problems associated with the Anthropocene and environmental sustainability;
• Making the invisible visible, revealing hidden and underlying structures which impact upon environmental sustainability of current and future societies;
• Exploring the contradictions and compromises associated with the Anthropocene and the transition to a more sustainable future;
• Moving beyond communication, re-expressing for different audiences the scientific, social and philosophical ideas and concepts associated with the Anthropocene and the transition to a more sustainable future.

Keep an eye out on the CCS website for more details on the culture/SHIFT programme in 2017. In the meantime you can read up on CCS Director Ben Twist’s thoughts on the ways in which culture influences wider society away from unsustainable practices in his Strategy Blog series.

Get involved in our work

A good way of getting to know CCS and the work we do is to come along to one of our Green Tease events which regularly take place across Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen.

Please email gemma.lawrence@creativecarbonscotland.com to find out more about the Arts & Sustainability Residency programme or to be added to the Green Tease events mailing list.

Follow our News page for our most recent blogs on Green Tease and see our Events page for details on our next Green Tease.

“Working together with other artist-thinkers over the residency helped me re-vision my poetry as part of a greater whole. It also helped me to hope.”

Samuel Tongue

poetry
References


4. ‘Inhabiting the Anthropocene’: https://inhabitingtheanthropocene.com/ Website and blog from an interdisciplinary research group at the University of Oklahoma.

5. Artist Francis Whitehead, ‘The Embedded Artist project and What do Artists Know?’ http://embeddedartistproject.com/whatdoartistsknow.html Whitehead’s proposal for the different skills and approaches that artists apply to their work. CCS has been using this shape our thinking of the ways in which cultural practices can contribute to and be part of the transition to a more environmentally sustainable Scotland.


8. Watershed+, Calgary, Canada: http://www.watershedplus.com/