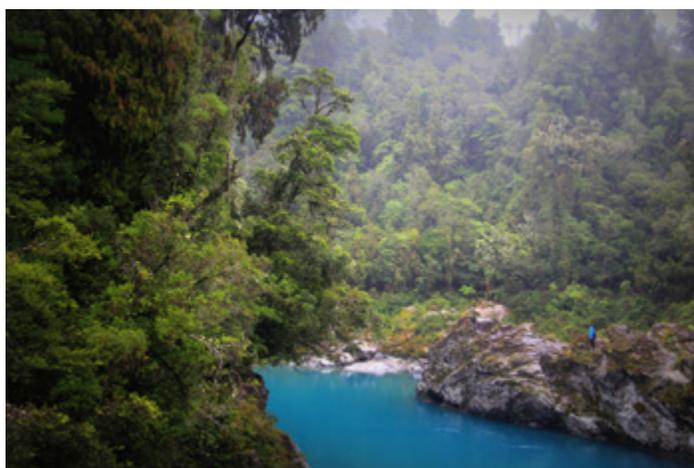


THE HOLLYWOOD FOREST STORY—ECO-SOCIAL ART PRACTICE FOR THE SYMBIOCENE

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Cathy Fitzgerald, Forest at Hokitika Gorge, West Coast, Aotearoa New Zealand

BEGINNINGS

As a teenager growing up in *Aotearoa* New Zealand in the 1980s, I loved getting the weekly illustrated *Joy of Knowledge* magazine. Artfully presented knowledge was my favorite means of understanding the world. I was also blessed with regular family trips to my mother's home, the wild areas of the West Coast of the South Island, now part of the World Heritage Forest, that instilled in me a great love of vibrant, forested lands.

Decades later, I live in the lands of my Irish ancestors. My ongoing creative and research work is a quest to understand how to live well with forests, how to enact ecological insights in these urgent times of eco-social emergency.

Ireland has suffered grievously over centuries from colonization. Famines in the nineteenth century were devastating when the populace relied on a single food, the potato, that failed catastrophically due to fungal blight. Ireland was socially and environmentally impoverished. In 1903, only one percent of Ireland's native forests remained.¹

Today, new forests have been planted in Ireland, but its lands now suffer a modern environmental shortsightedness, industrial forestry. Fast growing, non-native, monoculture plantations of Sitka Spruce are clear cut and replanted for material and economic profit. This capitalistic forestry model and mindset are anti-ecological. In Ireland and across the Earth, industrial forestry depletes soils, pollutes adjacent rivers, limits wildlife, and alienates many from forestry.

The globalized forestry plantation model is emblematic of the man-made catastrophe that is the Anthropocene. Donna Haraway identifies this when she renames modern culture's ecocidal era as "the Plantationcene."² Following recent IPCC



Hollywood forest is a continuous cover forest growing under the Blackstairs Mountain, South Carlow, Ireland

and WWF reports, urgent attention is being given to increased tree-planting in Ireland and elsewhere.³ However, a necessarily urgent shift toward ecological forestry—not only to prevent climate breakdown but to counter species collapse and soil degradation and to improve social amenity—is just beginning to be discussed.

MY ECOLOGICAL ART AND FORESTRY PRACTICE OUTSIDE MY FRONT DOOR

In 2008, I found myself exploring an alternative to industrial forestry in Ireland after I built a home with my husband within a twenty-year-old small monoculture conifer tree plantation. I realized that I had the perfect trial place to explore new-to-Ireland, close-to-nature ecological forestry and develop an ecological art practice right outside my front door. I named the plantation-slowly-becoming-a-forest that we live with Hollywood Forest, after our rescue dog Holly and the native Holly that grows in the area.

To transform Hollywood Forest into a mixed-species, diverse-aged forest, Pro Silva Ireland (www.prosilvaireland.com) foresters helped me and my husband to selectively thin around 25 percent of the Sitka Spruce every three years. Before long, an army of native Ash and other tree seedlings appeared on the forest floor and grew fast among the shelter of the remaining conifers.



Joan Fitzgerald walking in Hollywood Forest

Unlike industrial forestry, ecological forestry fosters environmental and social, as well as economic values. Over time, the native species that have appeared in Hollywood Forest will become the future trees of a mixed, more resilient forest. The less disturbed soil will become richer, and the trees left to grow will store more carbon and become more valuable.

Birdsong and beauty, always indicators of healthy ecosystems, will increase, too. The regular thinnings now heat our home (we no longer rely on imported heating oil, the main fuel used in Ireland) and offset our forester's tending costs, so we can maintain Hollywood Forest indefinitely.

Additionally, the slow, ongoing forest transformation suited my aim to develop an ecological art practice. My creative practice, *The Hollywood Forest Story*, was also the basis of my doctoral art practice research, which explored why ecological art practice continues to be marginalized in contemporary art. Surprisingly, ecological art practices are less appreciated, taught, and supported than one would imagine considering the worsening planetary catastrophe.

WHAT IS ECOLOGICAL ART PRACTICE?

The ecological imperative for a livable planet represents a massive, perhaps impossible, paradigm shift for modern cultures that focus primarily on human interests. Simply put, an ecological frame asks us to consider more—is it good for me? for my community? for my environment?⁴ As art critic Suzi Gablik realized in her three landmark books in the 1980s and 1990s—summarized recently in a podcast series—an ecological worldview radically challenges the conventions of modern art practice.⁵ Also, an ecological frame applied to creativity is more than depicting images of nature or nature themes. From living an ecological art practice and reviewing my and others' work in my doctoral research, I discovered the following to explain ecological art practice.

ECOLOGICAL ART PRACTICES ARE EXPANDED, ETHICAL ENDEAVORS

Developing over recent decades, ecological art practices are constellations of art and non-art activities to transmit ecological understanding. They contrast with modern art's premise that art is about creating art objects and counter the erroneous notion that modern culture exists apart from, and is superior to, the living world. Ecological artists develop slow practices to understand the interconnectedness between evolving places and human and non-human inhabitants thriving. Such practices evade easy definition as they are not about creating art to hang on walls.

Ecological art practices foster encounters for much-needed ecological learning and healing. These practices emit whole systems awareness, so practitioners and the communities they work with can more fully understand ecological well-being. They exhibit an expanded ethos toward inter-species and

inter-generational well-being. Such practices are reminiscent of how creativity is valued in Indigenous cultures, which regularly remind their communities that their well-being depends on healthy environments.

ECOLOGICAL ART PRACTICES ARE SOCIAL INQUIRIES

Ecological art practices are inherently social inquiries about how we can live better with the Earth and its inhabitants. Rather than the possessive individualism celebrated in modern art, ecological art features collaboration between art and non-art practitioners—ordinary people and experts who compile their lived experience and knowledge of a place. The social power of such practices, “the emergent form” (see diagram) is to radically change the conversation of a community toward life-sustaining living—of how they can live well with their environments in perpetuity. Leading ecological art practitioners, Helen and Newton Harrison, over many decades, stressed that changing a community’s conversation is the vital outcome of ecological art practice.⁶ In my work, I regularly consult with foresters, local land and forest owners, local politicians, philosophers, academics, and other creative people for valuable experiential and disciplinary understanding.⁷ I bring many ways of knowing together to learn how best to care for Hollywood and other forests.

In ecological art practice, social skill in maintaining relationships with others is as important as artistic skill. For this reason, I prefer to use the term “eco-social art practice” rather than “ecological art practice” (and it also clarifies for those who think ecological artists are only interested in nature scenes). In my doctoral research, realizing eco-social art practices are social inquiries, I applied action research, a well-known social inquiry methodology, to more easily explain the main stages, dialogical form, and social power of eco-social art practice.

WHERE IS THE ART IN ECO-SOCIAL ART PRACTICE?

You might ask, where is the art in eco-social art practice? Art activity in eco-social art practice has a critical role. In *The Hollywood Forest Story*, I use photography and video to translate my experiences of learning about ecological forestry, in this particular small forest. My photos and videos bring the sights and sounds of Hollywood Forest and the practice of ecological forestry to others.⁸

Art activities can powerfully transmit deep knowledge of place to others. Art, as neural scientists and philosophers confirm, is the necessary, powerful complement to reason that has always moved societies toward new moral understanding.⁹

At times, I have created unnarrated works so Hollywood Forest can reveal its own transformation (the seedlings in the video at www.humansandnature.org/the-hollywood-forest-story are the native Ash trees that appeared about a year after we first thinned the forest).¹⁰ I also write to share the joys and challenges of ecological forestry as much as I create imagery. My art and writing are a means to an end in an eco-systemic inquiry. They help spark conversation with others to bring forth new life-enhancing values and practices for living well with forests and others.



Action research can be used to identify a cycle of five critical method stages.



Gwen Wilkinson, Action research and my Hollywood Forest Story shared in a free audiovisual i-Book, 2014.

HOW DOES ONE SHARE AN ONGOING ECO-SOCIAL ART PRACTICE THAT CONTAINS SO MANY ACTIVITIES?

As my eco-social art practice evolves different activities over years, I self-curate my practice on a blog, *Hollywood Forest* (<https://hollywoodforest.com>). My blog is both a chronological archive and live diary, and it builds an audience for my work. Over time, followers begin to appreciate the open-ended

storyline of *The Hollywood Forest Story* and the connective aesthetic of my eco-social art practice activities. My PhD examiners were a little startled when I said blogging was my main creative practice, but I can quickly share ecological insights from a tiny forest in Ireland to neighbors and others across the globe. Australian artist-researcher Dr. Lucas Ihlein's doctoral work confirms blogs are an invaluable scaffold for ongoing eco-social art practices.¹¹

A QUESTION-BASED LEARNING PRACTICE TRANSFORMS A FOREST, MYSELF, AND OTHERS

Questions create the form of eco-social art practices. Even though *The Hollywood Forest Story* appears to consist of seemingly unrelated activities, it is anchored by my continually asking how I might better live with Hollywood Forest.

Ecological artist, educator, and researcher David Haley argues that ecological art practice promotes Question-Based Learning, not reductive Problem-Based Learning. The latter underlines the limited, linear education model of reductive science that narrowly presents the world only as “a problematic to be solved.”¹² Ongoing questioning, valuing many ways of knowing, drives me to constantly interrogate the simplistic, harmful worldview of industrial culture. As Haley realized, Question-Based Learning is the means to gain deep ecological knowledge—ecoliteracy of a place and its concerns.

ECO-SOCIAL ART PRACTICES ARE MEMES FOR THE SYMBIOCENE—A NEW SUSTAINABLE ERA

Some people are dismayed at the ongoing destruction industrial clear-cut forestry promotes. Philosopher Glenn Albrecht has named Anthropocene grief “solastalgia.” The term describes the tangible emotion that arises when we accurately sense that our homes are being destroyed. We can be overwhelmed, even paralyzed, by solastalgia, the now clinically and legally recognized anxiety of experiencing negative environmental change.¹³

Importantly, the collective sharing in eco-social art practices can transmute our grief, our solastalgia, into agency for alternatives. Albrecht believes cultural practices can shift us from being entangled in the endgame of the Anthropocene to a new era of the Symbiocene, when we reinvent our culture so that the thriving of all beings is prioritized.¹⁴ For example, followers of *The Hollywood Forest Story* develop ecoliteracy and agency to embrace alternative forestry in ways that are meaningful for them. One follower, Nicola Brown, enthusiastically borrowed my forester to plant a mixed permanent forest.¹⁵ She now uses the tree leaves to print up-cycled clothing that attracts the attention of textile artists from across the world. Another, Alan

Price, planted native tree species to create a permanent forest habitat—his response to help stop the freefall of Ireland's wildlife caused by intensive agriculture. Both caught the meme of ecological forestry from my humble eco-social art practice.

For me, the ecoliteracy that I gained from *The Hollywood Forest Story* was personal, and then unexpectedly political. As my understanding of Hollywood Forest's well-being deepened, I was inspired to protect not just this small forest, but all forests! Albrecht describes this as soliphilia—the extent to which one's love of home and kin promotes political action, “at all scales, from the local to the global.”¹⁶ Although introverted at the best of times, *The Hollywood Forest Story* compelled me to contribute to progressive Irish Green Party national forest policy and advocate support for the developing international law against the crime of ecocide.

ECO-SOCIAL ART PRACTICES FOR LIVING WELL IN THE GREAT TURNING

It is now eleven years since I began transforming Hollywood Forest. There is growing, if belated, global awareness that restorative land practices—like ecological, permanent forestry—are urgently required across the Earth.

In 2013, I made this nighttime video of the young Ash trees growing so well in Hollywood Forest.¹⁷ Around then, I was aware that a fungal Ash-dieback disease was sweeping across Europe. I somehow thought the Irish Sea and adopting ecological forestry would prevent this disease from affecting one of Ireland's most common and beloved native trees, which grew in Hollywood Forest and across the country.

But already in 2012, poorly regulated, globalized European tree nursery operations had brought the airborne disease to Ireland, and it quickly infected trees both old and young. My solastalgia returned full force! My former vigorous Ash saplings, dying so quickly in front of me, brought me up sharp against the grief and realities of the planetary emergency. I, like many others, are having to rethink what species can replace the sudden demise of an important Irish native tree species. The Ash tree can't be easily replaced, as it supported unique wildlife and had excellent timber qualities and heritage values. (Many Irish place names are derived from the beloved Ash tree, as highlighted by Irish photographer Sarah Flynn.¹⁸)

In recent weeks, I've been reading and hearing ominous reports from central Europe that Germany's well-managed forests are failing because their resistance to disease and pests is threatened by quickening climate breakdown.¹⁹ The opportunistic



Gwen Wilkinson, Cathy Fitzgerald and others in Hollywood Forest, 2014.

Spruce Beetle in particular is decimating their conifer forests. The arrival of this beetle would be a gamechanger for Ireland's monoculture conifer industry—the lessons of Ireland's famine past sadly have not been heeded. Ecological understanding, ecoliteracy, is still so poor!

In her essay “The Great Turning,” Joanna Macy consoles us in this time of planetary emergency. She reminds us that our ecological endeavors have their own intrinsic rewards, whether their initial goal is achieved or not. And even when failing to reach the desired outcome, the gains can be invaluable in terms of all that has been learned in the process—not only about the issue, but also about courage and co-creativity.²⁰ Facing uncertainty by linking arms with others in my eco-social art activities I know will inform, encourage, and empower me to keep working to safeguard my forest kin outside my door.

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NOTES

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