

Did the sky used to be full of birds?

Claire Loder

My son asked me this question when he was around seven. I'd been sharing the theory of shifting baselines with him (Tree 2018: 147), a complex idea that he'd distilled into this question. Time travelling, holding the things he knew, birds and sky, close.

I couldn't answer yes because I'd not seen it in my lifetime, so the two of us could only raise our eyes skywards and imagine. And what a beautiful phenomenon to imagine, if you ignore the gut punch of species loss and the associated climate implications – which of course, we can't.

This chapter is punctuated by bodily felt epiphanies; it's been hard to read the accounts in this collection because they emerge out of fragility, loss, aggression and a startling disconnect between humanity and our planetary kin. But each chapter holds, for me, a revelation or new understanding of my possibilities as an artist, a biological being and a human in this era of ecocide.

I firmly believe in Wah's notion of artists as agents of behavioural change (Chapter 3, this volume). For this we need to be armed with knowledge and skills beyond our disciplines and be adept at collaboration. In recent years the threads of my studio-based ceramic work have entangled themselves with ecology, horticulture and ongoing community work for a project, Blooming Whiteway, that I co-founded. What follows is a short meditation on the assimilation of the ideas presented in this volume and how they align with my own desire to follow an ecological imperative. Over time, a gentle rupture, a slow uncoupling of clay and kiln, has been occurring. With this imperative as my measure, I'm asking myself if I'm standing in the ruins of my plinth-based practice or amongst some earthy possibilities worth excavating.

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Since 2005, I have been making ceramic heads and faces. Early on I configured my working processes to allow myself to linger with the raw clay. An early commitment to single firing during my MA, firing once, rather than twice or multiple times (as is the tradition) meant I avoided working with the inhospitable bisque surface in favour of the clay in its delicious, moist, malleable, visceral state. Also of benefit was that single firing kept costs and energy consumption low.

A second habit, embedded early on, was the systematic photographic documentation of each head as it progressed from raw to fired object. My early snapshots were rudimentary but informative. Gradually, as I became more adept at using the camera and analogue processes gave way to digital, I began to spend more time taking photos. This enforced *looking* allowed me to attune to the material qualities of the clay – to capture changes as it relinquished its moisture, for example. The camera crept into my work and the images produced began to undermine the primacy of the fired object in my practice.

In 2021, I exhibited as part of *Use and Ornament* at Airspace Gallery in Stoke-on-Trent for the British Ceramics Biennial. Titled *Join Field to Field and Live Alone in the Land* the collection included two large-scale photographs expressing the material sweet spot of raw clay. The title, a passage from Isaiah (The Holy Bible: Isaiah. 5:8) about human avarice, is applicable to our current predicament – the climate crisis, habitat loss, ‘farmageddon’ – in other words, landscapes which offer little for our kith and kin in the wild world; the most desolate expulsion.

Join Field to Field was a synthesis of ideas formulated inside and outside of the studio. It coincided with my slow retreat from fired objects, described earlier, and was accompanied by emergent thinking and actions away from the studio, activities rooted firmly in the place that I live – an ex-council estate on the edge of Bath. In 2016, I co-founded Blooming Whiteway, a growing project focused on a front garden festival with creativity written into the constitution. My partnership with co-founder and regenerative gardener, Jude Rice, has been fundamental in bringing together my work from inside and outside the studio.

By gardening and talking, with curiosity, we have developed a critical approach to growing, an approach adopted from arts practice, gradually shrugging off many of the weeding and tidying habits of a traditional approach in favour of engaging watchfully with an ecological eye. Who is visiting our plants? What habitat are we offering to insects? This ongoing dialogue around horticulture, storytelling, ecocide, awe and our commitment to the places and spaces we reside is a dynamic, living practice.

In 2020, I passed my Royal Horticultural Society Level 2 Certificate in the Principles of Horticulture – and emerged from this period of study as not-a-gardener. ‘Gardening’ is problematic, as Giovanni Aloï contends:

By definition, gardens are ideological islands. Perimeters, boundaries, fences, walls – a garden is a miniature state: a self-contained nation inhabited by plants whose biological origins are often difficult to clearly identify or ascertain. (Aloï 2020: 25)

Gardening in its traditional form negates the habitat of possibilities; it denies the permeable edges, the ecotones, the generous plantings that spill into the streets or abundant shared intersections where the public and private meet. My newfound skills in horticulture had in some ways taken me away from that which fascinated me. I wasn’t a gardener if this is what gardening was/is. But my identity as an artist and my commitment to arts practice as an attentive, critical and curious process bound up with our actions within the living world, and the human behaviours that have led to ecological overreach, was further reinforced. Now, however, I was an artist who understood a little more about plant behaviour, a little more about soil and the life cycle of so-called pests and a lot more about the limitations and boundaries of a horticulture course in responding to ecocide. I was also coming to an understanding of the nature of gardening in an urban/suburban context – the fertile, wild and unruly territories of the ‘urban commons’ (Oliver Gilbert quoted in Matthew Gandy [2022: 109]).

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I’d like to return to the clay here and talk a little about my relationship with it as a material for making. I started using clay after many years of painting with acrylic on board, ultimately concluding that the board was inert, uncooperative and intimidating. By contrast, diving into clay was a revelation. I’ve always felt that the clay is in dialogue with me as I make, it’s quick to gather imprints, marks and traces of my fingertips. We’re working together – aren’t we?

Reading Pigott’s thoughts on hylomorphic making in her chapter on basketry prompted a rapid reassessment of the authenticity of this dialogue. Maybe I’m not *making-with* my material after all. I’m not joining in the ‘process of formation.’ Every time I approach it, I have an image of a head in my head, and I then impose this image on the clay slab. Yes, the clay responds to my touch, it mediates the image somewhat – but with this reassessment in mind this feels more like it is reflecting my actions, passively assimilating my marks and lines; an earthy mirror rather than an equal partner.

This insight led to a much more emotive realization. Thinking through the formation of clay from biological matter, mineral components, water-filled pockets and air cushioned gaps, its muddy lineage from vegetal being to shale and slate kin, all of this embodied vibrancy and notions of deep materialism as explored by Harper and Chave (Chapter 4, this volume), and animacy as examined by Kimmerer (2015: 56) has helped me pay closer attention to my material to see it as the life-world that it is. Holding all of these thoughts in my mind, it dawned on me that the final indignity for this vibrant material assembled from the commonwealth of life is that I then shape it into human form.

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In 2022, I had a number of opportunities to experiment with a new way of operating as an artist. Three events laid the groundwork for this. The first was leading an Artists Soup Kitchen for Air Space Gallery in Stoke-on-Trent to accompany my work in the *Use and Ornament* show – a straightforward presentation with a small audience and food that evolved into a fruitful discussion about clay, community and growing. The second was attending Haumea Ecovercity for a course on Eco-literacy for the Arts, which provided me with vocabulary, resources and a community of artists working with a similar imperative. The final event was reading ‘Articulating Artfulness: Exploring the Ecological Potential of Creative Conversation’ (Pigott 2020) in which Pigott explores the possibility of conversations as arts practice and explores artfulness as a series of attuned, accumulated actions lived in the everyday. This paper consolidated for me Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison’s notion of ‘conversational drift’ (see Adcock 1992); their belief in the power of the bard and their rejection of an either/or of visuals and words for artists. Using maps, drawings and diagrams as prompts and jumping off points, they used conversation to tell the stories of the ecological niches central to their work – understanding the power of the spoken word to captivate and engage with their audience.

I began to ask myself if the objects I was making could be considered ‘activators’. Certainly, in Stoke-on-Trent, the presence of my work in the *Use and Ornament* show had led to engagement with an audience around clay, city growing and community. My sculptures allowed me entry to spaces and into conversations, within which I could explore themes of nature and notions of the wild world, plus I could gather informal information about the specifics of local communities which addressed my growing curiosity about work on the ground and in the ground, at personal, neighbourhood and local authority levels.

One of my 2022 experiments was an event called Plant People Plant, designed as an engagement project for the creative collective, Bath Art Depot (BAD), founded by local residents in Bath, UK. It included a walk along a stretch of the river Avon. This skinny path was lined with a whole community of plants and creatures. I talked about ecology and gardening and invited the humans to *meet* the plants – we recorded our encounters, spent time drawing and learning about wildflowers, then ended the day in the greenhouse to review what we'd made. One participant thanked me and said 'I had never looked at these edges before'.

Denning calls this type of encounter 'creative activism' – 'bringing people together in the act of care' (this volume, 173). The public-facing outcome for Plant People Plant was a highly visible walk, an outdoor drawing activity and potting session beside the river, and then generous spaces for conversation over food. It was also an experiment in the play between the complex nature–culture values that Collins and Goto (Chapter 8) speak of – a terrain that is shifting as I write, evidenced in the proliferation of exhibitions using ecology and the more-than-human world as curatorial prompts (see Brien, Chapter 11) and by authors such as Giovanni Aloï who explore the plant presence in contemporary art. Plant People Plant also resonated with Arne Naess's notion of deep ecology that Fan draws on in Chapter 7 about the value of walking in silence. These are small steps towards a larger question of how to wake ourselves up to the fact that the world does not exist for us.

Since the inception of Blooming Whiteway, Jude and I have been attuning to ecology and ecocide and gaining an understanding of our own, and the field of horticulture's, anthropocentrism. We have come to understand our small spaces as pieces in a wider cityscape – one component in a mosaic with connected ecologies. This challenges the idea of gardens as private, isolated sites and essentially collapses the distinct fields of horticulture and ecology. We now find ourselves in conversation with the sites we garden, the fragmented commons that called to them and our city's more-than-human occupants.

As Blooming Whiteway, I advocate relentlessly for my estate and its place in the city, highlighting the beauty of the biological beings that I live with, challenging the dominant narrative of vandalism and lack of care. I am not denying the carelessness but aim to refocus attention on what is here and who we share this corner of the city with. Through these conversational exchanges we have built a growing network of residents, gardeners, growing groups, conservation organizations, food producers, land managers, faith groups, schools, climate activists and decision-makers across the city. I use all this

learning in my exchanges with the visual arts students that I teach, declaring my allegiance with the living world.

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Narrative is the warp and weft of my artistic life. The current iterations of my practice are no exception. Thinking with and through words has always been a great pleasure and it's where I find beauty and clarity. The short titles for my sculptures have been growing in complexity behind the scenes. Those few small words accompanying a head or face are no longer enough, there's more I need to say. So now there are titles and improvised conversations but also scripts – all bound together with a growing vocabulary that better describes and explores how the human and more-than-human world connects and where I might sit in it.

In 2016, while researching the author, Richard Jefferies, for a project with Swindon Museums and Art Galleries, I learnt that Jefferies was famous for lying around in fields in his native Wiltshire, communing with wildlife, which apparently proved unsettling for those who knew him. For reasons unfathomable to me, this image of Jefferies, recumbent in a field, unsettled me too. I find his writing bramble-dense, but the image of him partially obscured by the long grass stuck and I've revisited it on various occasions since. Wah's thoughts (Chapter 3) on the power of images and stories and our interior narratives are at play here. My image of Jefferies had no words, just emotions, but I've carried it with me, rolling it around in my imagination and my body, re-looking, re-feeling – asking 'now, does it make sense? No? What about now?'

Making ceramic heads didn't help me unpick this particular conundrum but growing a garden and talking about it did. I have an emerging sense of the *lives* in my garden. The nature activist, reformed landscape designer and author, Mary Reynolds, has something to do with it; for her a garden is a gift and responsibility – the life force of individual plants, kinship with the small scuttlers and buzzers. Reynolds urges us to think of ourselves as guardians rather than gardeners (Reynolds 2016). Communion with the garden community.

Similarly, reading Robin Wall Kimmerer (2017) and Suzanne Simard (2021) has further attuned me to the living world; I am developing a sense that my garden somehow *knows* the grass verge across the road or the badger that pads and paws at it every night. And while I might not always consciously acknowledge this, the suggestion is deeply affecting and emits a charge of electrical emotion – a pulse of love, curiosity and awe. My typing fingers are electrified with the wondrous possibilities of this idea. Reading each of the chapters in this collection, there

was a moment where I had to look away from the screen and sit with my head in my hands while I felt a new revelation permeate my skin, soaking into my body on a wave of emotions. This ‘interoceptive perception’ (see Wah, this volume, 62) is an emotional update, a bodily reboot to accommodate new versions of the world.

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As I’m slowly disentangling myself from the kiln as my primary tool, I’m simultaneously performing a protracted retreat from my studio. In 2018, while preparing a presentation for a group of Ceramics MA students, on a scrap of paper I scribbled ‘is my greenhouse my studio?’

I grew up on a 12-acre smallholding in Cambridgeshire, where my parents were tenant growers. As a child I believed that anyone with an office job was just waiting until they had their own piece of land. My parents grew food for market initially as part of the government’s Land Settlement Association scheme. They trained and met at Oaklands Horticulture College, Hertfordshire, in the 1960s. My father’s life is a love affair with plants. By age ten he knew all the wildflowers and began to experiment with transplanting them from the countryside into his parents’ flower garden. These curious and sympathetic encounters were later overlaid with the drive to grow crops for market.

My mum’s life has been entwined with plants, too – recently she shared a story with me that I’ve been rolling around in my mind as an embryonic project. In 1960, aged seventeen, she worked at Ham House in Richmond, for Carters Seeds show department preparing plants in terracotta pots for the Chelsea Flower Show:

I was shown how to water by using a cane in my left hand with a wooden cotton reel on the end of it with which I tapped each pot as I went along the glasshouse. If the pot rang I watered it but, if it didn’t ring I didn’t water it. It was a very good way to learn how to water correctly. (Hilary Loder)

The idea of using sound to determine moisture in a potted plant is effervescent in my imagination. The use of an intermediary to ask a question of the plant is a wonderful decentring action – a sonorous activity placing terracotta as an interface between human, plant and substrate.

In their chapter, Duffy and her co-authors’ questions such as ‘What does a tree do with the sound of a rock?’ are abuzz with the same delicious unknowableness; they help us shed our human body for a moment. The small iterative actions by my mum speak to the workaday use of terracotta in the horticultural industry.

They also speak to our present, a spectral toll ringing out across the tide of plastic at our feet and in our bodies, the production/use/disposal of which has laid, and continues to lay, waste to so many life worlds, as both Harper and Chave's and Tweed's chapters attest.

This terracotta tale feeds into ongoing research of mine around a trail of terracotta shards that begin a stone's throw from my house. It leads to the site where a famous plant nursery once stood, the sunny slopes covered by a large expanse of glass. As a child, if I wasn't outside then I was running around under glass. Glasshouses loom large in my imagination. Not the quaint glasshouses of suburban back gardens, but peaty cathedrals – multi-spanned structures that housed thousands of plants, bedded in with a toxic mix of chemicals, controlled by mechanized systems of irrigation and ventilation.

In *Horticultural Appropriation* (2021), a conversation between Claire Ratinon and Sam Ayre which explores links between art, horticulture and decolonization, Ratinon talks of the glasshouse as

another aspect of the performance of horticulture. A demonstration of wealth, power and prestige through the emulation of global imperialism on private land. ... Plants were like any expensive item – to be collected, displayed, admired and envied. (2021: 13)

The concept of ownership and control permeates traditional horticulture. Plants are our playthings, our gardens emulate rooms in our houses, we allow the plants in our gardens little agency, we get edgy when our garden plants grow beyond the limits of the anthropocentric ambitions we have for them; we're blind to the life cycles, wants and needs of our vegetal kin. We plant plants for butterflies but nothing for their caterpillars, we feed the birds but spray the weeds. We tend our roses but blanket the soil in plastic grass. We think we can pick and choose but our erratic loyalties dismantle ecologies.

The performative rituals at play in lawn management, formal gardens and the in-out of municipal bedding plants are fertile ground for artists. There are a raft of tropes to challenge and multiple aesthetic starting points here for artists. I'm picturing synchronized mowing performances à la the *Ziegfeld Follies*, overlaid with the audible response of decollated grass, communicating the chemical response that grass or any plant emits under attack. Spaid's chapter explores experiments by artists and others in bringing the audible capacity of plants to our attention in an attempt to increase our esteem for our vegetal kin. She charts the work by 431art whose systematic approach brings to mind the rigorous planting trials of Suzanne Simard (2021) outlined in her book, *Finding The*

Mother Tree. The thorough, careful approaches taken by ecologists and artists alike demonstrates a vital cross pollination of research methodologies – artists adopting approaches from science and science seeking creative collaborations to delve into the complexity and impact of ecological overreach.

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Here on Bath's city edge I am desperate to reach for the green and bountiful rural blanket, the 'wildland next door' that Kate Raworth and Janine Benyus (2022) talk of in *Understanding Planet as Household*, and heave it right up to my front door, to tuck in the edges along my street and invite the hedgerows to scramble up the houses. These imaginings preoccupy me every time I leave the house. I can feel my state of mind slide into what Halcrow illuminates in her chapter, drawing on Glenn Albrecht's concept of solastalgia (2019: 27); grief for the denuded place I live, the grey and hard surfaces suppressing the living world, absent species, pollution in my lungs, an ugly river of plastic at my feet destined for my bloodstream. My heart is always heavy out there – meanwhile my imagination is buzzing, searching for a creative answer.

Pulling up this bountiful blanket in my mind's eye holds the glimmerings of a project idea – a collaboration with digital artists, ecologists and animators to demonstrate how my street might feel if it was an abundant and living space, with food to forage and bird song and buzz. Tweed's chapter explores some possibilities, highlighting how design fiction, under the umbrella of speculative fiction, holds many possibilities for artists. As I walk the streets I'm asking 'what if' – what if the trees were more numerous, what if the hedges were full of fruit, what if the city's hard surfaces were shrouded in wild green. Wah's chapter highlights the notion of pathway narratives; the amplification of stories that exist in fragments, in order to demonstrate that a liveable world is possible. Architecture Is is an organization doing this in Bath. Their 2022 exhibition, *Are You Ok?* used photos and videos – including a visualization by artist and architect, Funda Kemel – to demonstrate a liveable, green and abundant city, yet still recognizable as the city we know. Similarly, Raworth and Benyus (2022) explore the design practice of 'Habitecture', a biomimic response to ecocide which considers every human-made surface as potential habitat for our more-than-human kin. What a wonderful world this could be.

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Pigott (2020) talks about the power of everyday actions in addressing ecocide: our accumulated habits and visible responses – including our conversations. As a

visual artist, I now find myself in a world of words. The narrative threads in my work and my love of language have led me here. I can hide in the formation of these words – crafting them is laborious but seductive and essential. Kimmerer asserts that ‘English encodes human exceptionalism, which privileges the needs and wants of humans above all others and understands us as detached from the commonwealth of life’ (Kimmerer 2017). Wrestling with my mother tongue is attuning me to her limitations and obfuscations.

During one of this summer’s extreme heat events here in the UK, I was trying to remain calm and cool at a friend’s house by talking about my feelings of distress, anxiety and alarm at what the climate was doing. My 79-year-old friend reassured me; she told me not to worry. I was – am – in a world of worry. At that point I had no comeback. I went away and thought about what I should or could have said, and asked myself what I was actually thinking ... and I realized that what every part of me was feeling was a simple love for the earth. In place of silence, I should have said ‘You’re asking me not to care for someone I love.’

A short time later, another conversation – a back and forth about the hopelessness of individual action against inaction by corporations and governments (‘why should I, if they don’t?’) prompted another reflection and helped me craft a script:

I have a child

I care for them, love them, nurture them – that is my personal responsibility to them.

I also want the local authority to care and to protect them, and help them thrive. I want the state to care for my love too. I want the global community to show compassion and commitment to my child’s future. This does not diminish my responsibility. It is simply a matter of layers of care. If the other layers let me down I will go to them and ask them why, but I will not be swayed from my personal and intimate duty.

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As the method by which these accounts have been communicated, I’ve found the written word a powerful and meditative form. Sitting, reading has been a quiet and concentrated activity requiring time, curiosity and patience. In addition, I’ve had time to think about the potency of the written word to communicate complexity and care; and my own capacity to *make* with words. Writing this response has revealed the appeal of the process for me – not only as a method of communication and for thinking – but also a place to immerse myself in,

to take refuge. It's been a privilege, for example, to slow-walk in the pocket of Halcrow along her beloved waterway, to share her grappling with words and frustration at the limitations of this form, but to nonetheless be deeply moved by her endeavour.

Art can offer a sublime refuge – a glimpse of a world that works. I found comfort in Duffy and her co-authors' concept of the melodious symphony and the jarring cacophony – that entangled sonic patchwork that reaches my ears (Chapter 1, this volume). The clattering jackdaws, whoosh of wheels, breeze in the trees. These ideas have helped me listen to human-made sounds with insight to their origin stories. They have alerted me to this additional complex living layer that harmonizes with the mosaic of green spaces.

In his article, 'Turf Wars', Giovanni Aloï explores work by artists such as Diana Scherer and Kandis Williams, practitioners who are 'prioritizing biology over aesthetics' (Aloï 2022). This tempering of aesthetic considerations in favour of an ecological imperative has accelerated the plant presence in contemporary art. There is a shift away from pure aesthetics in horticulture too, not before time.

For example, in his 2022 book, *Gardening in A Changing World*, Darryl Moore asks gardeners:

What would it be like if our engagement with plants was ecological ... if we approached plants not by simply using them as solutions, but by working with them as allies or kin in entangled networks with other species? ... what would it be like to face the future from a plant-centric perspective? (2022: 7)

Asserting 'the centrality of plants to human life and thought' (Lawrence 2021: 2) is what Critical Plant Studies has been doing for over a decade. Lawrence describes this burgeoning field as 'an interdisciplinary and umbelliferous field which sits betwixt and between the environmental humanities, plant science, art and aesthetics, philosophy, ethics' (2021: 2), which has me asking how horticulture intersects in this interdisciplinary landscape. Gardening as an artist has attuned me to the lives in my garden, and a critical eye has made my gardening practice more rigorous and curious, leading me to the liminal space where horticulture meets ecology. With even a basic understanding of soil structure (including the role of clay), plant bodies, habitat mosaics and inter species relationships, the living world in this corner of Bath has become my studio.

The power and utility of arts practice in climate breakdown lies in its criticality and audacity. Incursions by artists into any territory that can ameliorate ecocide are crucial and readily demonstrate the fruitfulness of frontiers for audiencing and the essential contribution by artists to emergent thinking. We need

creativity and ecology in every sphere of life. This collection of reflections on the relationships between art, creativity and ecocide have led me away from my material while also leading me back to it. The clay I use is a phenomenal material – with narrative richness, plasticity, mimicry, it surfaces a multitude of mysterious underground stories. It has potential as an interface, an exchange mechanism between art practice and horticultural knowledge in its current and future forms. These chapters provide vocabularies and frameworks which help me situate the shifts in my practice. My ceramic practice is fractured in some sense but this fracturing has rendered it permeable and receptive. Like the boundary of my garden.

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