

# Articulating artfulness: Exploring the ecological potential of creative conversation

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Notions of “artfulness” are increasingly being used in the humanities and social sciences to nod towards ephemeral linkages between creativity and ecological sensitivity, but there has so far been little work to flesh out in detail what this term entails, both conceptually and in practice. This paper contributes to current understandings of “artfulness” through an in-depth case study of conversations facilitated by an arts-sustainability project in Wales known as Emergence. Through the author’s experiences of conversations at Emergence gatherings, the paper develops a theory of artfulness as a manner of being that is attuned to a dispersed, emergent version of creativity. The radical ecological potential of the conversations is explored through three themes: vulnerability and receptivity; reconfiguring self–other subjectivities; and posthuman sensibilities. In doing so, the paper contends that artfulness further expands ideas about where and how creativity arises, presenting possibilities for non-artists to creatively compose-with the world in transformative ways. This is essential because the imaginative and creative leap required in response to ongoing ecological loss is so great that it should not be left to professional artists alone.

## KEYWORDS

artfulness, conversation, creativity, ecology, listening, voice

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

“Artfulness,” and associated phrases such as “arts of living,” “arts of socioecological transformation,” “arts of noticing,” and “arts of attentiveness” (e.g., Haraway, 2016; Hawkins & Kanngieser, 2017; Hawkins et al., 2015; Tsing et al., 2017; van Dooren et al., 2016) are becoming commonplace in the humanities and social sciences, signalling efforts to highlight distributed, everyday, and ephemeral forms of artistry and creativity in the context of ecological destruction. However, these concepts are often used rather vaguely, their meanings implied rather than explained. Drawing on examples of facilitated, creative conversations, my aim in this paper is to contribute to fleshing out, more precisely, what artfulness means, both conceptually and practically, and what relevance it might have for ecological attunement amidst the daily activities of making lives.<sup>1</sup>

This paper takes as its starting point a number of questions about artfulness. For example, how does artfulness translate into ways of living differently and better? What do the “arts of living on a damaged planet” (Tsing et al., 2017) look, sound, and feel like in practice? What kinds of environmental politics can artfulness generate or make space for? Put

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another way, if, as the German sculptor and performer Joseph Beuys once provocatively claimed, “even the act of peeling a potato can be a work of art, if it is a conscious act,”<sup>2</sup> then can a similar sentiment be extended to the somewhat more complex task of living amidst ecological devastation and attempting to stem the tide of further ruination (Tsing et al., 2017)? Relatedly, how might doing so help expand notions of “environmental art,” thus keeping the concept from reproducing narrow ideas about what constitutes creativity (e.g., Boyd & Edwardes, 2019; Hawkins, 2017; Mould, 2018)? Indeed, what does evoking “artfulness” do that seemingly similar terms like “mindfulness” do not? To explore these questions I reflect on my experiences with an arts-sustainability project in Wales known as Emergence, which describes itself as “a collaborative project that advocates creative practice for a sustainable future through hosting artful events and gatherings.” What has struck me throughout my several years of involvement with Emergence is that no matter what the event or gathering, conversations are always the bedrock of what happens. Emergence’s engagement with the idea of artfulness and its perspective on speech as a creative act has been the impetus for this paper.

My reasons for offering a personal account of conversations with Emergence are two-fold: first, it is useful for noticing some of the bodily and affective engagements that are acknowledged as important realms of experience, knowledge, and politics (Anderson, 2009; Dewsbury, 2010; Thrift, 2011). This is also true in relation to ecological crises which, as well as being planetary in their reach, are also felt “at the visceral register of being” (Erev, 2019, p. 3). An autobiographical approach corresponds to ongoing moves within and beyond geography to understand research as a process of learning through the body’s own responses and “haptic knowledges” (Crang, 2003, p. 499), experiences that are highly variable between people. An autobiographical stance also enables me to reflect on issues relating to experiences of subjectivity and agency, which are central to the kinds of relational, posthuman environmental ethics that I am interested in exploring in this paper (e.g., Braidotti, 2019; Whatmore, 1996). The second reason is that it helps me to convey some of the spirit of Emergence conversations, in which participants were always encouraged to speak “from the ‘I.’” Talking from a personal perspective about climate change and related issues (in contrast to dialogue which often revolves around assertions of fact, blame, problems, and solutions) opens up, I suggest, a different kind of critical lexicon for ecological concern, and responds to calls for academic experimentation in telling smaller, personal stories (Cameron, 2012; Lorimer, 2003).

However, I am mindful that using narrative as a method and form of activism – while useful for disrupting hegemonic accounts – is also partly contingent on my (white) privilege, and risks overemphasising personal experience at the expense of attention to structural power. Emotions are never “pure,” because they are discursively shaped and interpreted, and this poses the important question of *whose* emotions are allowed to constitute politics (Ahmed, 2014). While keeping these important critiques in mind, I turn to personal experience on this occasion with the view that responding to socio-ecological crises will require plural approaches that acknowledge the structural, personal, racialised, and unequal politics through which these crises unfold.

In what follows, I first contextualise the paper with an overview of recent approaches to art, creativity, and environment. I then introduce Emergence and the nature of my involvement with the project in more detail. The main body of the paper focuses specifically on the ways in which Emergence facilitates conversations as “artful” encounters. I identify three areas related to forging alternative ways of being-in-the-world in response to ecological circumstances. The first is how Emergence conversations make space – both in their content and form – for difference, discomfort, surprise, and vulnerability, and how this corresponds with novel and much-needed forms of ecological relation. The second is the ways in which conversations (and in particular, an attention to sound more than vision) create subject–object (or subject–subject) relationships that might map on to, reflect, and influence relationships and alienations between humans and environment more generally. The third area of interest is how an attentiveness to the *sonority* of voice, rather than only the meanings of words, might help develop posthuman sensibilities and attunements.

My interpretation of artfulness and analysis of the empirical research presented in this paper is aided, in particular, by some key theorists: most directly, Erin Manning’s chapter on Artfulness in her book, *The Minor Gesture* (2016), has been invaluable. What I attempt to do in this paper is to elucidate key aspects of Manning’s philosophical concept of artfulness through an empirical case study, and also to connect it more directly with ecological struggles, a context in which the term “artfulness” is increasingly being used. I also draw on Tim Ingold’s theorisation of how speech constructs and calls into question subjectivities in order to articulate artfulness in the context of conversation, while Anja Kanngieser’s work on the ethico-political force of voice is central to my analysis of some of the political implications. Finally, Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism, which I draw on in the conclusion but which is an implicit thread throughout, provides a helpful way of conceptualising the transformative potential of artfulness. Barad’s insistence that “our (intra)actions matter – [because] each one reconfigures the world in its becoming” (2007, p. 394) and her attempts to understand social change through insights from quantum physics resonate strongly with Emergence’s own interpretation of artfulness as a kind of energetic continuity with dispersed, universal creativities. Indeed, in what follows I use “artfulness” and “creativity” somewhat

interchangeably because – as detailed more fully in the following section – I approach the concept of artfulness as a particular way of framing what “creativity” is and does, in that it directs attention to how creativities circulate and emerge intra-subjectively, and sometime unconsciously, rather than necessarily being associated with intentional acts by particular individuals.

## 2 | SITUATING ARTFULNESS

Creative arts practices are recognised as capable of nurturing the kinds of sensory, emotional, and affective dimensions necessary for moving beyond intellectual understanding to enabling and empowering action on environmental problems (British Council, 2010). Charismatic installations such as melting ice blocks, oil-coated tombstones, and pollution pods (by artists Olafur Eliasson, Ian Wolter, and Michael Pinsky, respectively) are just some of the recent high-profile, artist-driven projects that reflect on what Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin call the “sensorial experience of living in an increasingly diminished and toxic world” (2015, p. 1), and there is a rich history of environmental and land art that has sought to engage with ecological struggles (for overviews, see Kastner, 2012; Sonfist, 1983). The transformative potential of these artistic endeavours is often deemed to lie in the artist's ability either to produce environmental awareness and/or collaborate with non-artists to generate emotions and attunements among audiences and participants at particular sites (Hawkins & Kanngieser, 2018; Miles, 2010). Although the effects of artistic works on people's behaviour are difficult to assess definitively, and thus evaluations are somewhat lacking, they are increasingly welcomed as ways to nurture awareness and engagement beyond the (often imperial) realm of science (Hawkins and Kanngieser, 2018; Moser, 2016). Indeed, as Harriet Hawkins insists, “if we are to come close to tackling this global crisis, some creative action is needed” (2017, p. 334).

However, artistic concern with environmental issues runs much deeper and wider than instances of monumental environmental art works which – as charismatic as they are – can be quite narrowly conceived in terms of the spaces they occupy and the people they engage, thus curtailing possibilities for social change (Demos, 2013; Mould, 2018; Neal, 2015). Myriad grassroots efforts to de-materialise and/or de-centralise environmental arts practices reflect this concern. Examples include arts–science collaborations (Gabrys & Yusoff, 2012), participatory crafting projects (Burke, 2018), walking (Butler, 2006; Vaughan, 2009), urban art interventions (Olsen, 2019), posthuman aesthetics (Dixon et al., 2012), airy poetics (Engelmann, 2015), ecological arts (Stern, 2018), social-engaged public art (Neal, 2015), and community art for environmental decision-making (Zurba & Berkes, 2014). These diverse examples of what might be called new genre public art (Lacy, 1995) share commitments to collaboration, embodiment, “dialogic” moments, and the audience (rather than the artist) as the primary site of meaning-making (Hawkins, 2011, 2012). While the politics and critical scocerteaupe of such practices can be questioned (e.g., Marston & de Leeuw, 2013; Pollock & Sharp, 2012), there is little doubt that an emphasis on the creative *process* of art rather than the outcomes opens up new intellectual and affective routes to engaging the world.

The concept of artfulness – particularly in Cultural Geography, the Environmental Humanities, and the Geohumanities, where it has had enthusiastic uptake – seems to share much of the public-spirited, process-orientated, sensibilities that animate new genre public art. However, what I want to suggest in this paper is that artfulness also signifies something different, which is a perspective on creativity that is not (or not only) about processes within particular art projects, but about a *manner of being* more generally (Manning, 2016). Further, artfulness alludes to a wider array of creative agencies, not tied to, as Nina Williams (drawing on Henri Bergson) puts it, “an intentional source as creator” but rather a “creativity in which both corporeal and material components are seen to have agency” (Williams, 2016, p. 1550). This understanding of creativity problematises the notion of a singular, autonomous (human) subject, and resonates with materialist ontologies. As Williams points out, rethinking creativity in this way is an important shift because in emphasising a dispersed sense of creative agency “we are recognising a future potential of *creativity* rather than the present subjects and objects which we term creative” (2016, p. 1550; emphasis in original), therefore becoming more open about the ways creativity emerges. Indeed, recent scholarship cautions us to think carefully about what “creativity” means in the context of social transformation. Hawkins observes how “creativity is quickly joining the ranks of ‘keywords’ that are central to an intellectual zeitgeist but whose complexity and tensions remain significantly under-theorised” (2017, p. 9). The emerging concept of artfulness is therefore an important consideration in contemporary theorisations of what creativity is and does (or might do) in relation to ecological loss and social transformation.

Artfulness also connects with spaces of everyday life in ways that are not so apparent in new genre public art. The role of everyday creativity in building and negotiating worlds has been well explored (for example, DeCerteau, 1984; Edensor et al., 2010; Hallam & Ingold, 2008; Hawkins, 2017). David Crouch describes creativity as “a dynamic through which people live ... in things people do, how they get by, feel a sense of wonder and significance, and make or find becoming in their lives, personally and inter-subjectively” (2010, p. 129). For Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold, creativity is a way in which

living beings make their ways through the world, which is “going on, all the time, in the circulation and fluxes of the materials that surround us and indeed of which we are made – of the earth we stand on, the water that allows it to bear fruit, the air we breathe” (2008, p. 2). The everyday is an important site of encounter when it comes to ecological crises; it is, after all, “the landscape closest to us, the world most immediately met” (Highmore, 2001, p. 1). It can also mean routine, familiarity, boredom, sanctuary, and encompass that which is unnoticed and inconspicuous. Nonetheless – and to return to the context in which Anna Tsing uses the term “artfulness” – this terrain of the daily activities of making lives is what ultimately alters our planet (Tsing, 2015, pp. 21–22).

It seems intuitive that phrases such as “the arts of living” and living “artfully” allude to a sense of skill, grace, creativity, and improvisation (among many other qualities) which might be useful for everyday life on a planet in crisis. My aim in the following sections is to expand on this intuition through an in-depth case study, and so to theorise artfulness in more precise ways than it is currently. Emergence’s approach to “conversation as art” is an example of what artfulness might actually look and feel like, and what relevance it has for enabling more ecologically sensitive ways of being. By this I mean ways of thinking about and relating with more-than-human worlds that are better able to take account of human *and* non-human agencies and interdependencies, broadening understandings of community, care, and ethics, and thus developing capacities to consider and make space for the needs of the (human and non-human) beings with which we share space. As Guattari puts it, ecological sensitivity requires new “microsocial practices, new solidarities, new gentleness” (2014, p. 34) and new practices of the self in relation to the other (although in many instances one could argue that such things are not necessarily “new,” but rather need to be re-discovered or allowed to become more visible). However, while the need for radical transformations in the everyday micro-politics of perceiving and relating with the world is clear, what is less clear is how we put ourselves (and the earth) in the way of such transformations (Gibson Graham & Roelvink, 2010). Amidst a sea of abstract ontological revisioning, the conversations I experienced with Emergence gave me a glimmer of what could be done on the ground.

### 3 | EMERGENCE AND CONVERSATION AS ART

Emergence is a grassroots project founded in 2010 in south Wales by two theatre professionals, Fern Smith and Rhodri Thomas. Born out of a shared concern for what they saw as the floundering relevance of the arts in relation to social and environmental upheaval, Emergence began as an exploration of the transformative power of the arts, and how creative energy might be fostered off the stage by artists and non-artists, in service of personal and ecological transformation. Emergence is now co-directed by Fern and her partner, Philip Ralph (also a writer and performer), and the project continues to evolve in tandem with their own personal and artistic endeavours to respond to ecological loss. Emergence’s activities have predominantly taken the form of small and large social gatherings and activities (see below), but the organisation has also been an influential presence in the arts scene in Wales, including the production of two reports (one commissioned by the Arts Council of Wales) that outline Emergence’s, and other artists’, creative vision for Wales (Allen et al., 2014; Smith & Thomas, 2012).

I first encountered Emergence in 2014, just as I was beginning my PhD research on imaginaries of socio-ecological change. This paper is based on my participatory research and recordings at a variety of Emergence events between 2014 and 2016, including *The Walk That Reconnects* (a four-day walk across the Gower peninsula with 30 other people in 2014, described by Emergence as a “physical and inner journey designed to build motivation, creativity, courage, and solidarity for the transition to a sustainable human culture”); *COP123* (a series of film screenings and conversations held in Swansea at the time of the COP21 climate talks in Paris in 2015); *The Station to the Sea Peace Walk* (which marked the 75th anniversary in 2015 of the bombing of Swansea during the Second World War, but engaged in themes of peace and violence more broadly); *The Gower Harvest Walk and Talk* (a day-long event in September 2015 to celebrate harvest time); and a series of informal gatherings throughout 2015 and 2016, often in people’s living rooms, which were loosely known as the *Re-enchantment Project*, and involved combinations of sharing food and talking together at significant times such as the Celtic festival of Imbolc, which marks the beginning of spring. While each event came with its own insights, my focus in this paper is on the nature of the conversations that were a common thread. In February 2016 I interviewed Fern Smith and Philip Ralph, and many other conversations I have had with them over the years have also informed this research.

By their own admission, its co-directors struggle to define what it is that Emergence “does” exactly, but a phrase that continually surfaces is “the art of living within the ecological limits of a finite planet.” As Fern Smith explained at one of the COP123 events in 2015:

we keep coming back to this phrase ‘the art of living.’ So, art is not a separate activity from life, but we actually join the two together. So, there is no division between art and life. And really that’s what we’re trying to

do with Emergence, which is really ... a creative experiment. Where we ask people, invite people, to come and join us, in those creative experiments.

In addition, Emergence explains on its website<sup>3</sup> that its approach is

not about bringing 'artists' together with 'ecologically minded people' 'economists,' 'activists' or 'scientists.' This approach embeds the reductionist thinking we are attempting to move away from.

In one sense, Emergence's approach corresponds with the sensibilities of new genre public art (Lacy, 1995) and relational art (Bourriaud, 1998), which emphasise social context and human relations, and the artistic process more than the finished work. Dialogical art, especially, seeks to facilitate conversational exchanges between participants, recognising dialogue's power as "an active, generative process that can help us to speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities, official discourse, and the perceived inevitability of partisan political conflict" (Kester, 2004, p. 8). Many efforts to increase public engagement with environmental issues utilise dialogue for this reason. Some examples include the UK-wide Stories of Change project, which has explored people's experience of changing energy use, and the creation of forums for local communities to participate in environmental decision-making (e.g., Paton & Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2010).

However, what is unusual about Emergence is that it approaches dialogue *itself* as the art form, rather than using a work of art to stage or facilitate dialogue. In addition, the conversations that I participated in at Emergence events never had an explicit aim or agenda, other than a broadly stated intention to "hold space" for whatever thoughts and feelings arose in response to the theme of the event.

Key to this subtle difference is an appreciation of dialogue not simply as an exchange of meaning or a form of negotiation, but as an embodied experience of participation. To paraphrase Ursula Le Guin (2004), it is to consider speech as a physical, bodily process of connection, a way of listening such that we synchronise with the people we're with, physically getting in time and tune with them. It is to consider words as events that transform both speaker and hearer. Fern, speaking at the first COP123 event held in an independent cinema on Swansea's high street, explained how she felt that

everything that really begins and has momentum and has ... a kind of enduring power and the possibility to change starts with connection, relationship and ... conversation and dialogue [...] Actually [...] that is often the most creative thing that we can do, as human beings.

To understand the importance that Emergence places on conversation as a manifestation of interpersonal creativity and possibility, it is helpful to briefly visit some of its key influences. In particular, the work of Suzi Gablik, an American art critic and writer who published predominantly in the 1990s, has been pivotal to Fern's, and thus to Emergence's, philosophy. Gablik was interested in the ways in which the roles of art and artists were changing – or should change – in response to unfolding social and ecological crises. She argued for a "re-enchantment of art" (Gablik, 1991), which would see a rejection of spectatorial modern aesthetic ideals and the valorisation of autonomous artists and "arts for art's sake" (Gablik, 1991, p. 2), in favour of socially and environmentally engaged practices that were integral to everyday life rather than cordoned off from it. David Bohm's theory of dialogue has also been influential to Emergence's approach. Bohm drew on his training as a theoretical physicist to develop an understanding of dialogue as a manifestation of, and contribution to, a participatory universe in which meaning is continually unfolding (Bohm, 1996). This intriguing parallel with physics is one that I revisit in the conclusion. For Bohm, as for Emergence, the transformational potential of dialogue does not lie in utilitarian aims, but more fundamentally in attending to the movement of *thought* in new ways. "Participatory thought," he suggested, centred on practices of attentiveness and listening, thus making possible different relationships with ourselves, other people, and the worlds we inhabit.

In the following three sections, I revisit my experiences at various Emergence events to illustrate how conversations were facilitated in this Bohmian spirit, as an art, and the possibilities this artfulness afforded me for thinking and feeling in novel ways.

#### 4 | ARTFULNESS AS RISK AND POSSIBILITY

Emergence facilitates conversations in ways that encourage participants to speak "from the 'I'" – that is, from one's personal experience, while resisting the urge to extrapolate to others, or make sweeping generalisations and assumptions about the state of others' thoughts or actions. The method – known simply as Council (Zimmerman & Coyle, 1996) – requires

that each person speaks without interruption from others, and also that participants try not to pre-empt what they will say when it is their turn but rather speak whatever they are compelled to speak in that moment. Conversations usually take place in a circle, and a talking piece – such as a heavy, smooth rock – is passed around to signify whose turn it is to speak.

While this might sound romantic, in my experience Council requires trust and an effort to resist the urge to perform conversation in all the usual ways. Often, I have found it a profoundly uncomfortable experience, moved both by my own acknowledgement of ecological loss (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018) and the experience of being profoundly *listened to* by the people I am with. As Peter Reason (2007) recalls, it is not unusual for Council to elicit many unexpected reactions, including laughter, tears, and embarrassment – emotions which spring from the act of giving voice to deeply held emotions in a public space (or at least, being given the opportunity to do so). This is not, in my experience, a very common approach to discussing environmental issues. There is a tendency to talk in abstracted terms about “the environment,” both in person and in writing; its problems, solutions, villains, and saviours – these are all well-rehearsed narratives for talking about ecological concerns. For example, after a screening of “Breaking Ice” (an environmental documentary) at one of the COP123 events, participants initially broke into excitable (sometimes confrontational) exchanges about the root causes of, and solutions to, climate change. It wasn't until Emergence's co-director Philip Ralph stood up to speak candidly about his fears that the atmosphere changed and people began to voice their feelings (as opposed to opinions) about climate change. He admitted that

the elephant in the corner of all of this, for me, is fear. Which has been rife this week [the week in which terrorist attacks shook Paris in November 2015]. But, I would argue – for me, don't know about you – is rife all the time now. I'm afraid to turn on my computer, I'm afraid to look at the news, I'm afraid to go out on the street, and talk to somebody. I'm afraid to have these conversations in rooms with people who I don't necessarily know what they feel.

After this, I too found myself voicing – to virtual strangers – thoughts and feelings about climate change that I don't even discuss with close friends and family, largely, I realised, for fear of making myself and others uncomfortable, and also simply because there rarely seems to be an opportunity.

The conversations at COP123 were, in essence, an invitation to be vulnerable. It perhaps seems odd to claim that vulnerability might be a helpful response to socio-ecological crises; “vulnerability” usually has negative connotations in relation to environmental change – it is something to be avoided, protected against, forestalled. As many have observed, in a prevailing atmosphere of fear and uncertainty there tends to be a fetishisation of certainty in order to try to stem a growing sense of vulnerability in the face of extremely complex global circumstances (e.g., Bauman, 2000). Nonetheless, the challenge for ecological imaginaries today is how to attune to complexity, rather than eschew it – even though doing so will entail mixtures of enchantment, strangeness, horror, and vulnerability (Brigstocke & Noorani, 2016). As Fern explained during her introduction to COP123, such an awareness is central to artful conversation because.

to get to a place of action we have to go through a sense of how we feel about stuff ... we need to go to the place of difficulty ... and see other people are there too.

Grant Kester refers to this as the “risk and possibility” (2004, p. xx) of the face-to-face encounter. For me, conversations at Emergence events have been opportunities to acknowledge my own, and other people's, deeply held emotions about ecological loss. Rather than inducing a permanent depression, these forays into sadness and discomfort gave rise to a revelation that I am not alone with my thoughts. Recent research in the UK has shown that such shared understanding is, in general, somewhat lacking: while most citizens value communal and compassionate values, they tend to perceive other people as selfish. When people wrongly infer that others are selfish, they are less likely to be active citizens themselves, perpetuating the perception that no one else cares (Common Cause, 2016). Shared vulnerability between strangers might therefore be a means for generating ethico-political awareness, and more communal ways of perceiving and being together (Ramsden, 2016).

Vulnerability also performs a resistance to the “resilience” concept that has come to dominate all manner of public discourse, from economy to ecology, but whose use has been variously critiqued for the ways in which it secures and ensures the maintenance of the neoliberal status quo and alienates people from politics and visions of the future (e.g., Bracke, 2016; Neocleous, 2012). If the resilience trope demands or creates an individualised, robust subject, always capable of “bouncing

back,” then vulnerability brings to the fore a very different kind of subject, one which is not only susceptible but *receptive* (Butler et al., 2016). Vulnerability is therefore a condition of relation between self and alterity, and might be a useful way of thinking and feeling our interdependence with one another, and also our corporeal vulnerability to and dependence on the more-than-human world.

This is not to say that conversations at Emergence gatherings always generated consensus. Although participants attending events about climate change were likely to be self-selecting and share broadly similar values, individual expressions of emotion about ecological loss were often starkly different, from rage to apathy. During Council, each person has an opportunity to speak (crucially, they are encouraged not to directly respond to another's comments but, as mentioned, to speak from the “I”), while other participants listen without interjecting. This is a surprisingly difficult task, both as a speaker and a listener, and yet the practice of refraining from instinctively reacting (whether in support or agreement) provoked a slightly different awareness in me, not only of how I listened and responded, but also of how multiple, sometimes conflicting, voices could be held in an encounter without becoming confrontational.

This “turning toward one another, at the same time leaving space for adversity and silence” (Kangieser, 2015, p. 83) resists drives to erase, tackle, solve, or reconcile the problem being discussed. Climate change, in particular, is often presented as a problem to be solved through collective action but, as Rachel Greenwald Smith suggests, the “problem-solving approach denies the ways in which such actions often turn away from the inescapability of pronounced biological, ecological, and geological change” (2011, p. 74). Erik Swyngedouw's analysis also shows how the consensual ways in which environmental problems are framed can be intensely depoliticising (Swyngedouw, 2013). Turning away from the intractable contradictions and difficulties of these times sidelines the emergence of the kinds of knowledges, subjectivities, and practices that are better able to cope with complexity and difference; within the “spaciousness of uncertainty [there] is room to act” (Solnit, 2016, p. xii). This resonates with Chantal Mouffe's (2000) concept of agonistic pluralism, in which disagreement and difference are held as central to the functioning of democracy, rather than a hindrance to it. Bohm (1996) highlights the relevance of artfulness to all this, suggesting that giving patient, sustained attention to the activity of confusion and conflict, through dialogue and attentive listening, is itself a primary creative act, requiring skill, patience, trust, and intuition.

Experiencing this kind of vulnerable dialogue, that held space simultaneously for solidarity and difference, has lent me a different kind of awareness about the “risks and possibilities” of face-to-face dialogue. In particular, the potential that I have – at least, when I remember – to shape what worlds and relationships such dialogues give rise to or make sensible. While in most day-to-day exchanges it may not be practical to adopt Council-style techniques such as passing round a talking-piece to designate time to each person (although in some situations – meetings, for example – it might be), there is nevertheless an urgent social and ecological need, as Isabelle Stengers contends, to “‘slow down’ reasoning and create opportunities to arouse a slightly different awareness of the problems and situations mobilizing us” (2005, p. 994). It seems to me that in my conversations with others I am presented with small but daily opportunities to do just that.

## 5 | ARTFULNESS AS INSIDE OUT

[The] associative and connective process of sound comes to reconfigure the spatial distinctions of inside and outside. (LaBelle, 2010, p. xxi)

Realms of feeling and perception – aesthetics – are often regarded as central to forging more ethical relations with the world. As Mark Jackson comments, “an unreconstructed aesthetics will not reveal a reconstructed subject or, necessarily, a reconstructed politics” (2016, p. 15). Indeed, questions about how aesthetic practices construct relationships between subjects and objects, and how these might map onto human–environment relations more generally, are not new, but they remain worth asking given a continued tendency in much well-intentioned contemporary art to isolate “nature” through representational practices (Demos, 2013, p. 2).

Tim Ingold's thoughts on the “topology of environmentalism” (2000, p. 209) are useful for exploring this point in relation to Emergence's artful conversations. In particular, Ingold's suggestion that visual perception reinforces a sense of externality of the perceiver, whereas auditory perception places the listener at the centre of a sphere, or life-world. So, “whereas we appear to be on the edge of the visual space looking in with the eye, we are always at the centre of auditory space listening out with the ear” (2000, p. 211). He argues that a predominantly visual perspective is one that expels humanity from the life-world, creating the impression that it is us who have surrounded it, rather than environments surrounding us

(although it is important to temper such a stark diagnosis with more recent analyses (e.g., Hawkins, 2012, p. 61) of vision as a more “enfleshed,” rather than distanced, sense). Recognising the shortfalls of visual perception, recent critical work has done much to elucidate how sonic geographies shape our perceptions of the world (e.g., Ellul-Knight, 2019; Gallagher et al., 2017; Kanngieser, 2012; Kanngieser, 2015), and art works also explore the potential of soundscapes for “enlarged, ecological listening” (Chisholme, 2016, p. 172; Barclay, 2014).

Emergence, too, engage with conversations as soundscapes, in ways that are not only about attentively listening *to*, but are also about active participation *in* those soundscapes. For example, during Emergence gatherings it was the sounds and silences of the participants themselves that created the ambience in the room, developing a politics of speaking and listening as they did so. Attentive listening was as important as the performance of speech; in Council circles, pauses were commonplace (I often paused as I struggled to articulate feelings that I had not given voice to before). Unusually long pauses were also accepted as part of the process; indeed, they were actively facilitated by the requirement that no one should interrupt or interject, something that I might ordinarily have felt compelled to do during someone else's “awkward” silence.

At other times, participants were invited to all fall silent together. For example, during The Walk That Reconnects event (a four-day walk across the Gower Peninsula), the contrast between being immersed in a group of 30 chatty people and suddenly falling silent (queued by the ringing of a small bell by one of the walkers), then walking together without speaking for half an hour, was stark. These silences granted me permission to “tune in” to other sensations and feelings of my walking body, whether that was hearing the wind in the trees, the footsteps of my fellow walkers, or a car alarm going off. As Susan Sontag (2002) observes, silence is never a genuine emptiness, for it exists in and is perforated by a world full of sound. Silence is thus another element in a dialogue and a way of focusing attention beyond one's self in a contemplative manner, such that self-forgetfulness might (if only fleetingly) prompt the dissolution of subject/object binaries in how a person relates to the world. Similarly, Vanessa Watts describes how bringing ecological perspectives to life can be a matter of listening: “our ears have become dull to the sounds of the land speaking up through our feet ... It is not a question of accessing something ... but simply to listen” (2013, p. 32). Anja Kanngieser and Nicholas Beuret (2017) have also illustrated how silence, by refusing the labour of incessant communicative relations and through expanding one's sense of the commons and co-habitation, may be powerful in resisting the kinds of logics that perpetuate cognitive capitalism, neocolonialism, and ecological destruction. There is also, as Kanngieser suggests elsewhere, a passivity entailed in silence (“a strategic deactivation”) that enables the kind of “creative, chaotic imagination that generates the promises of new worlds” (2015, p. 82). Consequently, the intertwining of silence and conversation, which included the sounds and silences of my own voice, enhanced my sense of being actively woven *into* a larger social (and ecological) fabric. To return to Ingold's point, this attentiveness to sound, silence, and conversation made me feel as though I was part of the experience, rather than being an observer (or listener) accessing the experience as though from the outside.

It is helpful here to draw on Erin Manning's distinction between art-as-object and art-as-manner (artfulness); “artfulness has no use-value – it does nothing that can be mapped onto a process already underway. It has no end point, no preordained limits, no moral codes. But it is conditioning” (Manning, 2016, p. 62). Even in the cases of the most participatory, collective artworks, Manning suggests that the question still remains: “to what degree does art retain this original dichotomy between maker and spectator/public/participant ... ? To what degree does the maker continue to see themselves as the central pivot ... ? To what degree do we continue to hold onto the idea of the artist as solitary genius?” (2016, p. 54). Approaching art as manner invites us to question an aesthetic model based on an experiencing, judging subject and an object of experience (Mignolo & Vásquez, 2013), and in doing so invites a different way of being in the world.

Manning's distinction needs to be treated with care because it risks undervaluing the skills and expertise of professional artists, a suggestion that – taken to its extreme – could be used as justification not to fund the arts. I don't think this is Manning's intention, nor is it mine, in making a case for artfulness. Rather, artfulness seems to me to be a way to learn from artistic processes and channelling them in daily life. This includes an ability to perform – even thrive – within a context of uncertainty, using skills of listening, improvisation, intuition, and trust; as Lucy Lippard suggests, artists are skilled at being curious, “they can ask questions without worrying about the answers” (2014, p. 9). Artfulness is not only about bringing awareness to everyday relations (this might be called “mindfulness”) but also about genesis: allowing new or different relationships or conditions to emerge through unpredictable interactions (hence Emergence's name). Indeed, Emergence's founders are arts professionals, and the project's ethos was born out of a desire to nurture – not necessarily *art* – but artistic sensibilities outside of traditional arts spaces, and in pursuit of finding new ways of relating. In this sense, artfulness is not about disregarding skilled artistry, but is rather an attempt to learn from it, recognising that, when it comes to finding alternative ways of being and doing, the imaginative and creative leap required is so great that we cannot expect professional artists to do it alone.

## 6 | ARTFULNESS AS POSTHUMAN POLITICS

Noise takes us out of ourselves. It invites communion, leading us to embrace the patterns that connect us to everything around us. (John Luther Adams quoted in Chisholme, 2016, p. 185)

So far, I have illustrated some of the ways that Emergence engage with conversation as a creative, interpersonal act, and the ways that this requires convivial and caring practices of speaking and listening – practices which may be unfamiliar and difficult but which are necessary for learning to live better with complexity.

In this section, I want to build a case for understanding dialogue not solely as a vehicle for self-expression but, more radically, as a mode of awareness and aesthetic sensibility, and thus how this might present opportunities for posthuman attunement. To do this, it is helpful to draw on Ingold again, this time on his study of the *sonority* of words. Ingold argues that – in contemporary Western culture at least – societies have arrived at a notion of language as a system of words and meanings independently of its actual voicing in the sounds of speech. He notes a contrast with music in this respect:

As musical sound permeates the awareness of listeners, it gives shape or form to their very perception of the world. But most of us, I think, are convinced that when we listen to speech it is quite otherwise. The meaning of spoken words, we say, are to be found neither in their sounds nor in the effects that they have on us. They are rather supposed to lie behind the sounds. Thus the attention of listeners is not drawn to the sounds of speech in themselves but rather to the meanings conveyed by them and which they serve, in a sense, to deliver. It seems that, in listening to speech, our awareness penetrates through the sound to reach a world of verbal meaning beyond. And by the same token, that world is absolutely silent – as silent, indeed, as are the pages of a book. In short, whereas sound is of the essence of music, language is mute. (2016, p. 6)

Un-muting language so as to tune into the ethical and political implications of the utterances and soundings of voices in shared spaces seems to be the task that Emergence is responding to through artful conversation. For example, many techniques of Council – sitting in a circle, not interrupting, speaking spontaneously, using a talking piece, and other ambient touches such as a candle placed in the middle of the circle – help to create a sense in which the soundings of speech are nurtured – honoured, even – in recognition of their power beyond self-expression.

These spaces also hold speech as an embodied and – importantly – not entirely voluntary or conscious act. Ingold, drawing on Amy Curruthers' (1990) work, uses the bodily comparison that, “just as the stomach well filled with rich food finds relief in a sweet-smelling belch or fart, so ... ‘the cognitions of the inner man bring forth words, and from the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks’” (Ingold, 2016, p. 18). In Council circles, there is an invitation to “speak from the heart,” letting whatever words need to, to come forth, rather than attempting to plan what one will say. As I experienced it, this spontaneity entailed relinquishing a certain dependence on rational thought in favour of flirting with “intuition at the edge of the nonconscious” (Manning, 2016, p. 44), and consequently I was often quite surprised by the words that came out of my mouth and the emotions they uncorked. This invited a subtle shift – however fleetingly – in how I saw myself. That is, that speaking from the “I” sometimes led me from a statement of “I am” to a somewhat startled question: “was that me?” (Manning, 2016, p. 37).

This momentary displacement of self creates possibilities for relating, sensing, and acknowledging more-than-human others in more plural ways. A plural approach is one that must attune to, and take responsibility for, what Kathryn Yusoff refers to as “insensible worlds,” because so much damage is imperceptible (for example, the slow accumulation of persistent organic pollutants in the fatty tissues of mammals, or the gradual shifting of temperature zones as the climate warms) (Yusoff, 2013, p. 218). Such an attunement requires a suspension of one's sense of self, to become sensitive to modes of thought that dwell at the edge of thought (Despret & Meuret, 2016). Thus, the invitation to speak from the heart, and to be surprised by the act of doing so, was an opportunity to see my self as outcome rather than initiator, as well as an invitation to sense – at the edge of thought – the multiple imperceptible forces that caused me to say what I said. As Manning insists, intuition requires “a long camaraderie engendered by a relationship of trust that leads toward an engagement with that which goes beyond premature observations and preconceived neutralising facts. Intuition is a rigorous process that agitates at the very limits of an encounter with the as-yet-unthought. Artfulness is the sympathetic expression of this encounter” (Manning, 2016, p. 58). Although the conversations in Council circles were, in an immediate sense, encounters between humans, it strikes me now that the ways in which the sounds and silences of speech were allowed to transcend cognitive

meaning offered a kind of ecological, posthuman training in listening very carefully to the imperceptible (Kanngieser, 2015; Williams, 2019), and to the possibility, validity, and value of things beyond human cognitive and sensorial reach.

An openness to the prospect of things beyond human reach is integral to the notion of artfulness that I am trying to elucidate; indeed, as Manning argues, an artful modality is “beyond the human. Certainly, it cuts through, merges with, captures, and dances with the human, but it is also and always more-than human, active in an ecology of resonances ...” (2016, p. 59). Such fields of relation may include the human, but they don't depend on it. This brings us back to the notion of a dispersed, emergent creativity that has many constitutive elements, “always composing a great deal more than our minds” (Williams, 2016, p. 1555) and engaging our bodies and sensations directly.

## 7 | CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON THE ECOLOGICAL POTENTIAL OF ARTFULNESS

In this paper I have tried to capture some of the ways that conversation, as facilitated by the arts-sustainability project Emergence, might be understood as an “artful” activity, and what it is about such artfulness that is useful for the complex task of responding to, and living amidst, ecological loss. In raising the possibility of artful conversation, my intention is not to denigrate the kinds of strikingly charismatic installations or innovative new genre art projects that have come to populate the categories of environmental and ecological art in recent years. Rather, in light of calls for more artistic and creative engagement with ecological crises, and simultaneous warnings about the perils of thinking and doing art and creativity too narrowly, this paper has sketched out a theory and example of artfulness that wants to think about and attune to creativity in more expansive – and everyday – ways.

Often, the phrases “artfulness” or “arts of living” are used in rather vague ways to hint at the generative possibilities that reside in the relationships between creativity and ecology. However, I think it is possible to use notions of artfulness with much greater specificity, referring to manners of thinking, sensing, and relating which are at once ephemeral and difficult, but hold out significant ecological promise. As Manning contends, “artfulness is rarer than art, [for] artfulness depends on so many tendings, so many implicit collaborations between intuition and sympathy” (2016, p. 63).

For example, this notion of artfulness-as-manner is important if we consider “the ecological necessity of thinking beyond entities and shifting into a more processual understanding” (Yusoff, 2013, p. 218), or, as Karen Barad (2007, p. 146) puts it, for finding ways to align thought and practice with an understanding of the world-as-becoming rather than fixed in essence. Artfulness, as a way of embodying such politics, means holding a “sympathy for the unfolding” (Manning, 2016, p. 62). It demands contemplation, lingering-with, tending, waiting, stilling, and listening – which is a different kind of activism than those which are driven by mobilisation and activity. Rather than attempting to foreclose futures, artfulness might be understood as a way of remaining intuitively open to possibilities in the present, while also developing a sensitivity to that which cannot be known, cannot be sensed. This might offer gentler, but perhaps also more radical, forms of environmental politics than those predicated on ideas of linear action–reaction and the kinds of consensually framed, abstracted knowledges that merely seem to perpetuate ecological ruination. Thus, the *ways* in which we approach daily life – even at the most mundane level of peeling potatoes, as Joseph Beuys once suggested – present opportunities for artfulness; that is, for interacting within the ecologies of our lives in more conscious and sympathetic ways, and for appreciating the ways in which our own bodies and thoughts participate.

Indeed, artfulness resonates with calls for new paradigms for social change which take seriously quantum concepts such as entanglement, uncertainty, complexity, and emergence (Barad, 2007; O'Brien, 2016; Wendt, 2015), and the possibility that, in the words of the poet, Lemn Sissay “it's the small things that make great change” (quoted in O'Brien, 2016, p. 618). Small actions tend to be overlooked in current paradigms of transformation, especially in relation to climate change. As Karen O'Brien notes, much current thinking on climate change mitigation is based on the deterministic assumptions of classical physics, where agents are discrete individuals or self-interested states that interact through local causation, with little or no role for subjectivity, consciousness, intentionality, and free will. But without taking into account the quantum characteristics of potentiality and non-linearity – that is, the potential for new conditions to emerge through unpredictable interactions – we may be underestimating the capacities of societies to transform. As Barad argues, “[o]ur (intra)actions matter – each one reconfigures the world in its becoming” (2007, p. 394). To talk of artfulness is also to ask what such a suggestion enables as an *idea*. In other words, how does it reorder relations among spaces and times, subjects and objects, and in doing so change what it is possible to imagine? In my experience, to think of myself as capable of being artful is to imagine myself with more agency to *compose-with* (Despret & Meuret, 2016) the world than perhaps I once did. As Williams (2016) points out, each moment is a kind of creation, and creativity has the potential to emerge at any moment. In turn, this raises the questions – what affects me and who is affected by my manner of being? It obligates (and empowers)

me to try to compose-with in more careful ways, which includes being mindful of the very imperceptibility of many of the relationships that compose me.

The risk in making such an argument is that it could be construed as putting the onus on the autonomous individual, suggesting that the world can be restored through subtle changes in behaviour, while obscuring the responsibilities of governments, institutions, and other power-holders to respond to ecological crises. It is essential that discussions of artfulness do not fall into this trap. On the contrary, I understand artfulness as a manner of being that gets beyond notions of an autonomous self, towards more interdependent understandings of subjectivity. Such transformations in subjectivity are foundational to forming the kinds of more ethical social and ecological relations that are desperately needed, and can be thought of as micro-resistances to self–other binaries that have historically prioritised (some) human life over all others (Hocknell, 2019). On a practical level, creating spaces of connectedness and interdependence (that can also hold adversity and silence) supports the work of challenging entrenched power, and of creating alternative worlds (Mouffe, 2000). For instance, social movements have long demonstrated the importance of artful dialogue within their communities – examples as diverse as the Zapatistas (see Sundberg, 2014), Occupy Wall Street, and Extinction Rebellion utilise talking, listening circles, and citizens' assemblies – and perhaps these point to how artfulness in general, and dialogue in particular, can support the work of radical progressive change.

There is much to learn from decolonial accounts of how agency and creativity are distributed and circulated through human and non-human worlds (Bawaka Country et al., 2016; Eshun & Madge, 2016; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014; Sheridan & Longboat, 2006; Watts, 2013). For example, Christine Ballengee-Morris (2008) and Laura Hall (2014) both write of how, in their respective Native American cultures, artistic practices are manifestations of human continuity with the earth, generating aesthetic sensibilities that are rooted in responsibilities for living well within ecologies, rather than only representing them. Importantly, creativity arises as much through daily activities of tending (gardening, cleaning, and talking, for example) as it does through particular “works.” Correspondingly, Elizabeth Grosz (2008) describes creativity as an open encounter “in the vibratory continuity of the universe as a whole” (2008, p. 10). If artfulness can invite ways of attuning to this dispersed, cosmic creativity, then it creates opportunities for inhabiting the world in different ways; it is an invitation to channel creativity more widely into the multiple, messy, and often mundane tasks of living on a damaged planet, and thus perhaps to go some way to restoring it, too.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Due to ethical concerns, supporting data cannot be made openly available. However, anyone interested in the interview transcripts can contact the author and consent from research participants can be sought on a case-by-case basis.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I take my cue, in particular, from Anna Tsing and her collaborators, who refer to artfulness in relation to paying better attention to the shared – sometimes ruined and haunted – landscapes of humans and non-humans (Tsing et al., 2017). In addition, Donna Haraway's (2016) work on sympoiesis (“making-with”) as characterised by creativity, curiosity and experimentation across life forms, provides a helpful way in to the kind of artfulness I seek to elucidate.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://ensembles.mhka.be/actors/joseph-beuys?locale=en> (accessed 10 May 2020).

<sup>3</sup> See <https://emergence-uk.org/> (accessed 10 May 2020).

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