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Improvising in Ruyang: Community Art as Ecological Practice

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Abstract

This study reports on the activities of the improvisation-based project TWIG, 'Together We Integrate Growth', which developed as a community initiative to facilitate ecological awareness through creative activities. It analyzes the TWIG Project as a model for practices of social, mental and natural ecology, as defined by Felix Guattari (2000) and in terms of its ability to use improvisation as a method for developing individual bodily perception and generating community interest in conservation of the local environment. Drawing parallels between TWIG's improvisatory programme and Michel de Certeau's notion of 'play' as an act of political resistance, this article suggests that ecological practice necessarily engages multiple aspects of individuals, their communities, and the surrounding environment.

Keywords

ecology
improvisation
dance
performance
community
perception



Figure 1: Planting a tree in the garden of Ruyang Primary School, Guangdong.

1. Images are taken from the author's personal archive.

This analysis describes the TWIG Project as an example of a community-based arts initiative which uses improvisation as a tool for facilitating ecological awareness. In this case 'improvisation' refers to a collection of awareness practices that frame one's relationship to other people and objects in space and time. I use ideologies outlined by Felix Guattari in *The Three Ecologies* to suggest that improvisation can act as a method for engaging people and making art in cross-cultural situations.¹

1. The TWIG Project in China

In May 2006, at the invitation of Vitamin Creative Space gallery in Guangzhou, China, my collaborator Richard Thomas and I set out from England to create an ecological art project with the Ruyang village community in Guangdong province. Having determined it would be redundant to burn extra fossil fuel in taking a flight to China for an 'ecological' art project, we decided to travel over land, hitchhiking from Devon, England to Poland and then taking trains through Belarus, Russia and Mongolia into China. We also decided that in order to make the journey a contribution rather than an acquisitive venture, we would plant trees and give free public performances with trees along our route. Naming the project TWIG, 'Together We Integrate Growth', reflected our goal to contribute to the 'greening of the environment and the greening of human sensibilities' (Sarco and Thomas 2006) along every step of our journey. We chose this name for its double meaning: in addition to the common understanding of

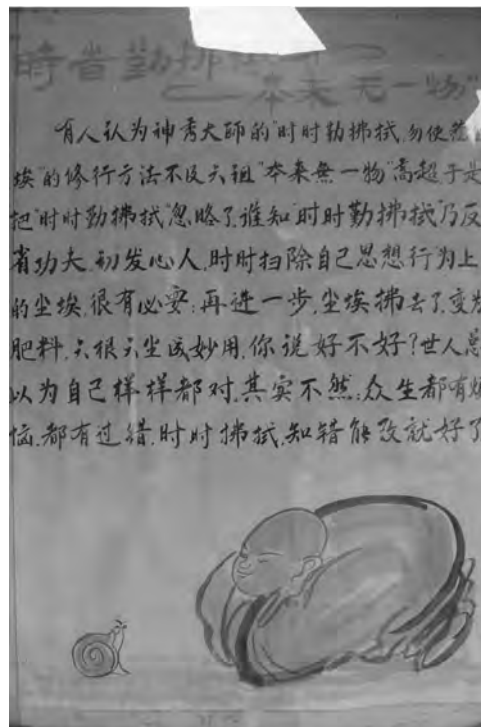


Figure 2: Buddha and snail, calligraphy at a monastery near Shaoguan, Guangdong.

a 'twig' as a branch or shoot from a tree or shrub, in the UK 'to twig' is also an informal way of saying 'to understand or realize something' (*Encarta English Dictionary* 2001).

Under the umbrella of my PhD research into dance improvisation as a practice of ecology, TWIG represented an opportunity to use improvisational processes to make art for and with diverse groups of people. Richard and I brought our abilities together in order to shape the goals of the project. Richard, a skilled social worker, martial artist, visual artist and gardener brought his knowledge of the outdoors to the project; I brought my skills in teaching, contemporary dance performance and improvisation. Entering into the project with several key questions, we engaged various communities along our route as a way of practically researching how art making might be a tool for facilitating ecological awareness. Our questions included:

- How can art making be a practice of ecology?
- How can dance improvisation performances, given outdoors and in public places, draw attention to trees or plants?
- How can we teach perception of our environment to schoolchildren in order to facilitate a respect for living things?
- How can art lessons and dance lessons serve to hone our skills in perception?
- How can ecological principles provide a framework for political awareness and intercultural exchange?

Two main practices crystallized in response to these questions. First, the free public dance performances that became known as *Twig Dances* developed into a performance practice that uses dance improvisation as a way of describing and calling attention to an individual tree or plant. In a Twig Dance, I take the growth structure and patterns of a plant as a blueprint for movement in a deliberate performance for any watching audience. Second, we offered free workshops in art and ecology to groups of local schoolchildren along our route. In Poland we visited three different schools and in China our project crescendoed into a six-week long workshop venture that involved 136 children from Ruyang village, situated next to the protected Nanling National Forest Park. By observing the outdoors and practising painting, drawing, rhythm and dancing we developed our sensibilities toward patterns, qualities and characteristics of plants and animals of the local ecosystem.

Interacting on a daily basis with the children through these activities and in conversation, we also began to challenge fixed ideas about ourselves, about one another and about our environment. For example, asking someone to draw a potted plant placed before them would often yield a hasty rendition of a generic 'plant', revealing how little we truly look at another object. Through time and careful observation the children would begin to see finer detail and more complexity in the object. Together we facilitated a learning environment that encouraged this careful observation through respect for others (both human and non-human) and through honesty in our individual responses to living things and to one another.

In these sessions with the children we developed a final performance held in the local village theatre, attended by 300-plus residents, and



Figure 3a: Red flowers in Nanling Forest.



Figure 3b: Improvising with different qualities.

produced an art exhibition of the children's work. Additionally Richard and I recreated one child's drawing of a plant as a mural on the side of the local natural history museum building, and created an art video, 'Twig Dances in Nanling', in which children on the programme performed dance improvisations with plants in the Nanling Forest.

Reflecting upon the TWIG Project in Ruyang offers a number of suggestions for how making art with communities might serve to facilitate awareness of ecological principles. Using Felix Guattari's definitions of ecology put forward in *The Three Ecologies*, I will suggest that TWIG Project offered examples of routes toward practising mental, social and natural ecologies for participants and villagers of Ruyang mountain community.

2. Guattari's ecologies: collective and individual perspectives

Felix Guattari's self-proclaimed aim in writing *The Three Ecologies* is to 'counter the pervasive atmosphere of dullness and passivity' (Guattari 2000: 69) in order to ignite creative autonomy in individuals and counteract the ecological crisis of our time. Similarly, the TWIG Project aimed to inspire self-confidence and creative initiative among children of Ruyang, thereby building a foundation upon which they might act as responsible agents of their social, mental and natural environments. Sharing their artwork with the larger village community offered another opportunity to express their collective and individual perspectives. While creating a space for these perspectives to feature, TWIG Project also acted as a lens, revealing the impact of culture and class upon our attitudes toward the environment.

The project shaped Richard's and my perspectives as well. By seeing more closely how life situations and economic imperatives influence the landscape and people of China and other countries TWIG passed through, we also became aware of how our own cultural backgrounds have molded our viewpoints and actions. This awareness also helped me to see *Twig Dances* and improvisation performances as examples of 'social ecology', that reach out to groups of people through a deliberate practice. Both aspects of performing, including dancing for an audience and teaching, proved useful ways of sharing dance improvisation as ecological practice.

My own perspectives on ecology and contemporary dance were made possible in part as a result of my upbringing in the United States, where both my national culture and my family valued a certain kind of individualism and encouraged me in the pursuit of academic and interdisciplinary interests in the liberal arts tradition. My ability to question how I might contribute to the health of the biosphere through dancing, and to create a four-year research project out of such a query, has been made possible by funding from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, which named me a graduate fellow in 2002. Given these privileged circumstances, my interest in so-called 'ecological practice' was voluntary, and a direct result of the space, time and freedom the financial support of my fellowship gave me. Had I been homeless, hungry or in danger as a great deal of the world's population are at this moment, my aspirations toward 'a practice of ecology' could not have been so methodical, literary or academic. For working people around the world who live a basic existence of daily labour for survival, aspirations toward 'ecological practice' are seen as irrelevant unless they can offer tangible benefits to their practitioners. If teaching or performing 'dance improvisation as a practice of ecology' is to be relevant on a global scale, it must be accessible to a wide range of audiences, and meaningful on more than just a theoretical level. The TWIG Project's journey to China offered a wide range of challenging circumstances by which to explore the potential of improvisation as a method of making art, and as a demonstration of ecological principles accessible to a diverse range of people and cultures.

For example, when the TWIG Project travelled through Poland and gave its first series of workshops and performances for schoolchildren, we were planting trees in schoolyards surrounded by countryside bursting with forests; our 'ecological' message seemed nearly out of place to these farming children, as Poland was perhaps the greenest country we travelled through on our entire journey. Even the Polish family we stayed with tended an impeccable garden from which they ate most of their daily food. In many ways these people were already living very close to the land, farming in a sustainable, low impact way. In the school we visited in the Polish town of Ilawa, the children knew more about the concepts of ecology and global warming, yet their practical familiarity with the countryside was less. The majority of these urban students appeared economically and academically privileged but less savvy in naming the trees and birds native to their area. Conversely, the majority of rural students appeared less privileged but more comfortable interacting with their rural environment.

We came into both kinds of these communities and began talking about global warming, personal responsibility, individual action, and creative response. We talked with the children about planting and caring for



Figure 4: Tree-planting at Grommotte Primary School, Poland.



Figure 5: 'Twig Dance' at Ilawa Primary School, Poland.

trees, and about the ecological value of forests on a global scale. In a way, this speech felt redundant because these people were already surrounded by so much greenery and for many of them farming was a basic way of life. Yet there was another kind of ecological practice which our visit suggested, a kind of 'mental ecology' which Guattari talks about (and which I will describe further in a moment) and which may have been proposed by TWIG's unusual dance performance in the schoolyard on those few days. The dances that I gave with the trees we planted were a different thing for most of the schoolchildren to see; to dance with a tree was a new concept. Also, dance without music was a strange idea, met with curiosity and some incredulity. By subverting these conventions, *Twig Dances* suggested different possible ways of relating to sound, performing movement, and perceiving the natural world.

The degree to which TWIG Project activities and *Twig Dances* represented radical ecological action can also be seen as a matter of class and cultural perspective. For many of the schoolchildren we worked with in Poland, for example, the idea of planting, and dancing with, trees as a performative act was likely unprecedented. For Richard and myself, the radical aspect of what we were doing derived from the grassroots level of our interactions with people, and how we were approaching the project: with a handful of core questions and a general intention to contribute positively. This deviated from a traditional model of having a detailed plan to follow before embarking on such an involved journey. It also challenged the idea that positive environmental action must only be implemented from a top-down, governmentally issued model. Instead, the nature of our project suggested that individuals can be inspired in simple ways to make positive, concrete contributions to their immediate and larger surroundings, by planting trees, for example. Individual contribution is one aspect of practice that 'eco-subjects' (Conley 1997: 98), or ecologically interested people, must engage in to resituate themselves in relation to the hierarchical powers that be. In his book *The Three Ecologies* Felix Guattari refers to this as 'reterritorializing' oneself (Guattari 2000: 23).

3. Mental ecology: re-territorializing as eco-subjects

'Eco-subjects' is a term Verena Andermatt Conley (1997: 98) uses to describe the people Guattari sees as necessary to an ecological revolution, often characterized by personal agency or 'creative autonomy' (Guattari 2000: 69). Guattari's definition of ecology is tripartite and comprises mental ecology, social ecology and natural ecology, where each of these 'ecologies' is geared toward constructing another culture that is evolving through individual participation and action. Accordingly, he advocates ecology as a *practice* that includes 'the articulation of: a nascent subjectivity; a constantly mutating socius; [and] an environment in the process of being reinvented' (Guattari 2000: 68) as a path toward overcoming the limitations of our current crisis-laden hierarchical world system. In a close reading of *The Three Ecologies*, Verena Andermatt Conley explains how Guattari urges people to 'think less...in relation to subjects and objects than to a territory that is more mental than physical in its articulation. Eco-subjects can deterritorialize and reterritorialize themselves continuously' (Conley 1997: 98). Reterritorialization aligns with the TWIG

Project's aims to (1) bring dance improvisation performance into situations beyond the circles of educated dancers, dance enthusiasts, critics, presenters, and experts; and (2) bring practices of ecology into situations beyond the circles of educated ecologists, ecology enthusiasts, philosophers, publishers and experts.

As a practice, ecology, according to Guattari, requires a high 'degree of creative autonomy' in order to act as 'catalyst for a gradual re forging and renewal of humanity's confidence in itself starting at the most miniscule level' (Guattari 2000: 69). Such 'creative autonomy' also translates into a kind of personal agency which is a core element of dance improvisation practices that hone the dancer's ability to sense his relationship with his body, space, time and things. Performing one's personal agency through the body's movement in relation to things as simple as people and trees on a city street, for example, is one way of implementing this agenda of creative autonomy on 'the most miniscule level' of the body.

Verena Andermatt Conley wisely asks *how* one might effect the changes called upon by Guattari:

The implicit question asks how we might bring about existential mutations that would remedy the situation, how we can be enabled to disengage ourselves from dominant cultural values, and how we can construct another culture. How do we, in Guattari's words, deterritorialize and reterritorialize ourselves?

(Conley 1997: 95)

Twig Dances performed as part of the TWIG Project offer several responses to Conley's question. As one example of our ecological principles in action, TWIG sought to re-territorialize performance practices. Rather than gearing dance performances to paying audiences in theatres, TWIG gave free and unannounced dance performances on the streets of towns and villages we travelled through. *Twig Dances* on street corners, train station platforms, and sidewalks acted as a research method into the usefulness of improvisation performance as a way of generating interest in the natural world and bringing dance improvisation performance to unusual and unlikely locations and people. I used my own senses to determine the effects my practice had on passersby, and also recorded the performances by video and photograph in order to see the event from a different perspective.

A steady stream of people from all walks of life passes by as I dance with this maple tree near Red Square in Moscow.

*Red square, dancing aware.
Pigeons hunt, policemen stare.
Maple tree moment
Slows down the flow
of business people busying by.*

Richard is snapping photos as I dance. I am examining how this tree grows: slightly wrinkled skin, strong branches, sturdy limbs arcing over the square fenced-in planter it's been placed in. Regardless of the throngs of people, it grows out, upwards toward



Figure 6a: Red Square Maple 1. Figure 6b: Red Square Maple 2. Figure 6c: Red Square Maple 3.

the sun and spreads out its greenery wide... These leaves have sharp tips, are flat-surfaced, and grow outward in strong veined flaps of pointed green; I can feel my response in pointing fingertips as my arms reach out and up, swaying slightly in the tickle of a breeze. I can feel the turgidity of these leaves, their strong centers and slightly floppier bat-wing style webbing between them; my skin stretches across my shoulders in response, and I can see a young Russian businesswoman looking at me. I look back at her as the tree might, indiscriminate but aware, acknowledging her acknowledging me, including rather than controlling or suggesting anything with my gaze. She continues to stare, a dubious look upon her face... flick! I flip my torso toward and away from the tree in a leaf-flapping manoeuvre.

(Sarco 2006)

Looking at the pictures from the dance I performed near the Red Square in Moscow, I can more closely scrutinize the faces of the people who were my audience. The place I chose to dance was not a tourist zone; it was outside the Red Square and near a metro entrance, on a wide sidewalk that was walked by many different kinds of people. There was almost no commercial activity along that stretch which is one reason I chose it – people passing there had little distraction as they passed from A to B except a dozen or so young trees. The faces show surprise, interest, disbelief, confusion and other expressions that lie somewhere between these.

My own experience as a white American woman dancing in the Red Square is mixed; will I be called out as attracting attention in an unauthorized activity? Will I be ignored as a lunatic? Will I be seen as foreign or will my Ukrainian features advertise me as Russian? I bring my own agenda to this act, which spectators probably see as difficult to categorize: I have not invited a dance audience to witness my performance, and I have

2. This is not to overlook the presence or influence of site-specific performance on the field of dance or the larger world, merely to point out that for a large majority of the public worldwide, seeing dance on the street in a situation which is not familiarly related to a celebration, entertainment or money-seeking venture (that is, busking or street performing) is still an unusual occurrence.

not posted a sign advertising my activity. This ambiguity creates the space for a different kind of event to take place: unusual and outside familiar territories of definition.

A trio of men in army uniforms pass, gazes intent on me as I dance. My movements are not pretty; my face is focused on embodying the tree's character, which is intent on growing, not on being flashy. Are the men alarmed? Bemused? I do not sense aggression but am aware of the situation: me, a foreigner, engaged in a strange act in the public centre of Moscow. I include them in my gaze but do not alter the rhythm of my movement.

(Sarco 2006)

Because when performing a *Twig Dance* I am not asking for money, or qualifying my dance with some sort of request for support, and because I choose public spaces without direct associations to commerce or entertainment (the only requirement is that a tree be prominently located there) I am positing an unusual relationship between people and trees in an urban or humanized environment: I re-territorialize myself in relation to the spectators when I perform to unpaying, unsuspecting audience members; I re-territorialize my body in relation to the tree by focusing my performance on it (rather than seeing a tree as a decorative object of scenery to be passed by or ignored, I study it by dancing its suggested score); furthermore, I re-territorialize improvisation performance as an event which can happen on a city street as easily as a country road or a suburban park², and which can invite the attention of people



Figure 6d: Red Square Maple 4.

from any class or cultural background, creating the conditions for a non-hierarchical audience-performer relationship.

4. Social ecology and intercultural exchange

Guattari writes that 'Social ecology will have to work towards rebuilding human relations at every level of the socius' (2000: 49), and particularly in ways that undermine the hegemony of 'Integrated World Capitalism' or post-industrial capitalism in all its guises. Toward this goal, TWIG Project used improvisation as a tool for conducting our workshops.

By respecting and paying attention to each other as people with important differences as well as commonalities, TWIG Project practised social ecology in its work with children in Ruyang. Rather than imposing a common goal for the project's outcome, we worked instead to create a workshop environment that accommodated the uniqueness of each participant while also recognizing tendencies common to each cultural background.

In line with Guattari's emphasis on recognizing the influence of Integrated World Capitalism on many levels of everyday life, TWIG Project aimed to widen skills of perception in order to train ourselves to understand relationships between organisms and people on economic, biological, and cultural levels. This required acknowledging the cultural differences between Richard and myself, as twenty- and thirty-something westerners, and the Chinese children we worked with. Additionally this required acknowledging the ability of our work with the children to produce another kind of cultural community, in which our common goals included becoming more interested and perceptive members of the living environment.

Toward this goal of widening our perception to include happenings in the social as well as natural environment, we asked ourselves how can an improviser's ecological awareness incorporate political awareness? How



Figure 7: *The Green Group.*

can improvisation practices present us with an opportunity to usefully acknowledge what is going on in the bigger picture in order to link the personal to the political – to relate creative acts such as dancing to the wider current of global economic, cultural and environmental events? And finally we asked, how effectively did TWIG Project embody these goals whilst also addressing the cultural differences and disparities of privilege so present throughout our interactions with the people we worked with, both in and *en route* to China? We used these questions to contextualize TWIG Project within a larger frame of world events, concluding that our goal of developing perception in all participants was in line with developing the responsible agency described by Guattari.

To begin, it can be argued that ecological awareness is contingent upon political and economic awareness. Andrew Simms makes just this argument in his book, *Ecological Debt* (2005), which details how the global environmental crisis is a direct result of the richest countries taking advantage of the poorest countries.

Simms (2005) draws a direct parallel between the global economy and the environmental crisis, and holds rich nations responsible for the causes of global warming. His findings underscore the importance of political awareness to any ecological agenda, and as such support TWIG Project's goal to bridge cultural and class divides as a central component of its work. Simms suggests that as part of a plan to remedy both the environmental crisis and global economic disparities, rich nations should pay underdeveloped nations a compensation fee for using more than their fair share of the atmosphere as a carbon dioxide dump. Simms argues that the economic inequalities among nations are directly related to the environmental liberties (read: trespasses) taken by rich nations and that both problems can be addressed by remedial political action involving international debt cancellation and adherence to stricter development codes for industry. Simms's economic analysis of the global environmental crisis is useful in understanding how the world economic system might be responsible for the differences in environmental policy among nations, and how business and legislature geared toward generating wealth has impacted upon both the environment and oppressed social groups. It offers a way of looking at the situation of the people in Ruyang village, where the TWIG Project gave its most in-depth workshop, as a direct result of the international economy.

Wanting to respond at an individual, grassroots level to the environmental crisis, TWIG aimed its workshop offerings primarily to children in developing regions of the world. The village of Ruyang in the Pearl River Delta Region of Guangdong was a particularly interesting area in which to initiate an ecological art project due to the rapid industrialization beginning to affect the region. Living in Ruyang was also an experience that elucidated for us the pressures of the global economy upon the lives and environment of China's working class, who made up the majority of the village.

For example, the village population is composed almost entirely of elderly people and young or school-aged children. Nearly all the parents of working age live in the labour quarters of the factories they worked in, leaving the grandparents to rear the children in the village. It is normal for a child to see his or her parent or parents (married couples do not always work together in the same factory and sometimes lived hundreds of miles



Figure 8: Ruyang village, next to Nanling Mountains.

apart) only once or twice a year. Of course, the factories providing these jobs and conditions are most often the multinational industries producing cheap goods for western countries' consumption. Furthermore, these industries frequently build in China because of its lenient environmental legislation for businesses, making the country, and Guangdong especially, famous for its growing industry-related pollution (Reuters 2008). As a result, the people living in Ruyang are quite dependent upon the income from nearby factories for their livelihood, and many view the escalating development of the area as a good thing. However, Ruyang borders Nanling National Forest Park, one of the largest areas of untouched forest in Guangdong province, and the encroaching industry from surrounding areas threatens the wilderness with development. With TWIG, we aimed to cultivate in the children of Ruyang an equal appreciation for the natural local environment, in order to spark a greater sense of pride in and care for their relatively intact wilderness surroundings. In this way we sought to transcend cultural differences to identify care for our environment as an omni-cultural concern.

Like TWIG, Simms's book also prioritizes environmental health as the lynchpin to other global problems; it describes how global environmental



Figure 9: Granddaughter and grandmother in Ruyang village.

health is the single most pressing current issue and simultaneously the most effective means of combating social and economic disparity. His book brings the environment to the forefront of consideration in international policy, highlighting how international policy that values capitalism as economic growth is the single biggest obstacle to working to combat global warming. Because the structures of international banking operate in a way that implicitly under-prioritizes the environment and makes social justice a back burner issue, Simms states that to reign in global warming, international governing bodies must agree to address social and ecological imbalances on a global scale, thus requiring rich, polluting countries to pay off their ecological debt to poor countries.

On first glance Simms's analysis seems to spell helplessness for individuals. Its scathing review of governmental behaviour is directed at people in



Figure 10: Time for 'Tree'.

power, and Simms's suggestion for rectifying the global crisis is a top-down strategy. But a second take of this information can bring about a kind of resolve – an acknowledgement that governmental trends are generally not trustworthy or timely and therefore, 'if you want something done right, do it yourself.' Such was the nature of TWIG's attitude of personal agency in response to the environmental crisis. TWIG's 'everyday' approach of planting trees with the children and teaching skills of observation through improvisation and drawing seems a fitting match to the description of mental ecology as described by Guattari. Guattari's words 'nascent subjectivity' (2000: 68) used to describe mental ecology could also describe the improvisational process: in TWIG's activities of drawing or dancing one's observation about a plant, for example, improvisation offered a route by which to perform an evolving, subjective experience of relationship.

Similar to the individually subversive activities outlined by Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 'play' as an everyday practice comprises another interpretation of a practice of mental ecology.

TWIG focused on simple, playful activities to engage children's sensibilities toward their environment on an immediate, bodily level. Verena Andermatt Conley, whose close reading of Michel de Certeau's work seeks to highlight the nascent ecological principles therein, has this to say about the steps one must take, according to de Certeau, to engage in ecological practice:

Through the study it becomes clear for the reader that a double polarity of ecological practice inheres in de Certeau's vision. One must, first, decompress, by countering the cult of information, open and make habitable a chosen space. Second, the First World must express compassion for, and solidarity with, those who do not 'have' by remembering what ecology has taught us about interconnectedness and pressure relations rather than simple organic composition. Third, the First and Third Worlds must thus seek to meet on common grounds in such a way that complexities of interconnectedness replace the former dyad of self and other.

(Conley 1997: 115)

Conley's mention of 'common grounds' upon which the developed and underdeveloped nations must meet seems fitting to the goals of TWIG, which also included creating a 'chosen space' in which children could be encouraged to observe and respond to the natural world in creative and individual ways, thus 'countering the cult of information' by perceptive experience. Additionally, TWIG emphasized bridging the gulf between humans and non-humans by striving to meet the natural world on similar common ground. Playfulness characterized this common ground as we encouraged the children to be alive to their senses as learning tools.

Richard's and my position as western foreigners enabled us somewhat to create this chosen space; because we were strange in many ways to the customs and culture of Ruyang we had the advantage of being able to cultivate a new space – common to us and to the children – in which we could gather to learn, move, paint, draw and talk. Our translators worked hard to transfer our ideas from English into Mandarin, creating yet another challenge to direct understanding between ourselves and the children. Yet, perhaps because of our special situation as foreigners, we were



Figure 11: Painting Rocks.



Figure 12: Playing with waves of movement.

able to introduce 'radical' ideas – such as dancing with plants – to the children, and were met with their total curiosity and interest. In our chosen space, many new things became possible.

De Certeau's proposition that ecology can only be practised in a way that brings the 'First and Third Worlds' together to illustrate the 'complexities of interconnectedness' grounds the idea that TWIG's work in art and ecology made the most sense when instigated in a cross-cultural, cross-class context (De Certeau 1984: 103). By initiating the workshop activities in Ruyang, and becoming part of the local community for the two months we lived there, our awareness grew about the importance of class and cultural placement to the readiness of any individual to engage in ecological practice. For instance, in China we noticed that the school-age children we worked with in the TWIG Project were loath to show signs of individualism or creativity, and were much more comfortable conforming to familiar rules or obeying authority. This was evident from our first workshops with the children in Nanling, and is recorded in our personal notebooks:

9 July 2006. When we invited the children to make their own rules for the duration of the course we were met with bored silence, almost as if they didn't understand at all what we were asking of them. Perhaps the translation was difficult for them but in each age group of children we encountered similar reactions, from eager excitement in game playing to listlessness when we asked them to join us in considering a serious proposition. [...]

2 August 2006. The Green group today was in top form. We had a special guest Emily who taught them an ancient Chinese poem by call and response, which is apparently a teaching technique they are familiar with, because all the children straightened up and put their whole selves into enthusiastically calling back the short verses that



Figure 13: Orchid.

Emily called out to them. According to our translator Elena they are quite used to learning by call and response in school and so this likely accounts for their enthusiasm for something a bit familiar amidst all our unfamiliar activities and requests. [...]

10 August 2006. We collected the children's art notebooks today and were able to flip through them to look at the progression of each person through the six weeks. It is amazing to see the quantity of similar drawings toward the beginning of the course, when instances of children copying off of each other were high. Toward the end of the course, this lessened, and we began to see real progression in certain children's drawing styles and in their ability to look closely at a plant.

(Sarco and Thomas 2007)

Perhaps these observations about the children's discomfort with creating rules can be explained by the differences in Chinese schooling: its use of repetition and emphasis on rote obedience, in contrast to the more European values of creativity and originality. Perhaps lack of confident individual initiative can similarly be put down to cultural expectations of social and political conformity. I can only speculate on possible causes, and observe how these children's capacity for original artwork increased dramatically over the course of the six weeks we worked with them; evidently the workshop opened up the potential for a whole range of previously unexplored ways of looking, drawing and moving for many. Children who copied their neighbour's still-life drawings in week one were creating their own original sketches in week six. Children who previously knew nothing about 'dance improvisation' were performing their own *Twig Dances* by the end of the summer. Richard and I benefited equally from the exchange. Particularly,



Figure 14: Aloe.

communicating across the language barrier (even though we had translators) taught us to use our whole body to illustrate an idea and to listen more thoroughly to others without the aid of verbal comprehension.

These learning experiences for all parties were made possible by the 'common ground' we created together with the children. Bringing the ideas of exploration and collaboration into the centre of our lesson plans enabled us to facilitate a two-way exchange of ideas. TWIG also integrated different activities – such as observing bugs and drawing, or observing flowers and dancing, for example – that are not normally practised in situ. That our goals for this project reached across the scope of both the 'great outdoors' and the art studio made group sessions into an exceptional space for studying interconnectedness. Richard and I thought of several other possible influences that were at work in making the workshops into effective learning environments in this respect.

One possible reason for the popularity of the project is that our local identity as foreigners afforded us a kind of celebrity status to the children, already making our actions appear larger than life. Whatever we did and wherever we went, we had an audience, and when the children showed up to TWIG sessions, they were eager and ready to learn. Many children were so enthusiastic to be there that they arrived 30 to 40 minutes before class started. So our status as foreigners could be one reason that the children responded so fully to the work we did in the sessions.

Another reason could be that what we were asking the children to do was unprecedented, to both us and to them. For example, when I



Figure 15: Malaika and Richard instigating classroom antics.

taught techniques for *Twig Dances* to a group of children, the resulting performances, which were filmed and made into a DVD as part of an art exhibition in Beijing, were markedly individual. The solos, duets and trio that emerged from the project showed very little evidence of the copying we had seen in children at the beginning of the course. Dance with a plant? Why not? Because there are no preconceptions about this activity to fall back on or imitate, each child had to create their own response to the problem, and this resulted in a whole range of unparalleled improvisations.

4. Natural ecology as interactive relationship

In the long term, we saw the project as benefiting the children by giving them a broader understanding of their own effects on their environment, and the effects of their environment on them. Ideally, it gave them the foundation of a lifelong interest in interconnectedness and a sense of their ability to cultivate an active relationship with the environment instead of feeling separate.

As I mentioned briefly, the influence of ideas travelled both ways; from the children we learned much about attention and interest – what keeps our interest when we are learning became a focus of our workshop sessions as we sought to strike a balance between ‘working’ and ‘having fun’ within our art projects. Furthermore, collaboration between ourselves and the children created a multi-noded exchange accessible to audiences beyond the classroom we worked in, in the form of our final performance and also the ‘*Twig Dances in Nanling*’ DVD which we produced in our



Figure 16: Painting weather mandalas.



Figure 17: Richard painting the mural in Ruyang.

time there. The satisfaction of unison was another point driven home by the children's enthusiasm. Certain familiar rhymes, rhythms and songs we created during the workshop were performed with gusto during the final performance, demonstrating the assurance and clarity available through unison group activities. Through all these sessions, however, our collaboration across cultural 'otherness' provided a space or common ground in which expectations were suspended to a certain degree, enabling the children, Richard and me to 'play' with the situation and improvise our way toward final artworks.

This 'play' is central to de Certeau's analysis of ecologically useful social activities. Drawing attention to the creative activities instigated by groups, like children, who '*make use of* or tinker about social space (Conley 1997: 110), de Certeau writes that

[t]here are a thousand ways of playing with and against the other, that is the space instituted by others, and that characterize the subtle, tenacious, and resistant activity of those groups that, since they have nothing of their own, have to make do with what they have.

(de Certeau 1984: 60)



Figure 18: TWIG mural in Ruyang village, designed by workshop children.

As a way of practising ecology in the everyday, the improvisatory nature of the TWIG project opened a space for play to take place, dislocating prescriptive ways of looking, dancing, drawing and conversing, and creating a space for learning open to all participants. Importantly, the 'social space' the workshops focused on expanded to include the common areas of the Ruyang village and the surrounding forest. By planting trees in the village common, by creating dances in the forest and by installing a mural in a public location, the children used shared spaces as places for creative activity. Acting as stewards of the land through gardening, as interpreters of the forest flora through dancing, and as participants of village life through developing a mural, these children practised creative, playful and active relationships with their environment.

5. Conclusion: improvising into interconnectivity

As a project aiming to illustrate interconnectivity and create experiential links between people and their environment, TWIG used improvisation to perform dance to strangers, to collaborate with children from different cultural backgrounds, and to create a common ground of play in which to explore notions of personal agency and ecological practice. These efforts manifested in events created by and intended for a number of groups including schoolchildren in Poland, passersby in the Red Square, and the children and citizens of Ruyang village near Nanling National Forest Park in southern China. In our methods of engaging these communities as collaborators and as audiences, we worked to encourage individual perceptual abilities, personal agency and sensitivity toward the natural world. Understanding ecology in terms of how it might be practised, the TWIG Project suggests that work with communities in mutually exploratory creative projects can underscore our interconnectedness and contribute to evolving pathways for participation and action.

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