

Feral Ways of Knowing and Doing: Tools and resources for transformational creative practice

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Creative practices have a role in mediating and supporting concrete, meaningful actions towards sustainability transformations. With this in mind: What are the possibilities and limits of the tools and resources that contemporary creative practices are using to reconceive and redesign forms of interaction between different disciplines, audiences and cultures for sustainability transformations? This contribution presents preliminary findings from a transdisciplinary workshop where the participants were invited to share their experiences of designing or using “tools and resources for feral ways of knowing and transformation” within creative practice. While the concept of ‘feral’ remained open to a wide range of different interpretations, participants used the term in three main ways: to foreground embodied, situated, bottom-up, ways of working with organic material and more-than-human issues that require relinquishing control; to refer to reappropriating existing tools and processes in ways and for purposes different to the original intentions, and; to accept and enable thoughts, feelings, and actions to develop in their own ways, beyond the creative practitioner’s control.

feral; creative practice; resources; transformation

1. Introduction

Design’s role in reinforcing the globalized, neoliberal, capitalist modernity that cripples social and environmental sustainability has been deeply felt, discussed, and criticized (Escobar, 2018; Papanek, 1972). At the same time, design and other creative practices can also inspire and help people reflect on

our place in the world and what it might mean to each of us. For example, creative practices can help us realise our interconnected existence and stimulate critical imaginaries of and collective actions towards more sustainable ways of living (Hesselgren et al., 2018; Irwin 2015; Light et al., 2018; Maggs & Robinson 2020) and being together on a damaged planet (Tsing et al. 2017). As any transformation towards sustainability must be imagined before it can be realised (Meadows, 2014), creative practices' power to evoke imagination has potential to help pave pathways towards social justice and environmental citizenship (Fazey et. al, 2018; Lopes et al., 2017). Hummels et al (2019) highlight the necessity of a first-hand perspective for realising transformation arguing that those aiming to foster change need to engage with, and live, feel, embody, and 'become' the change on their own. Creative practices bring a unique experiential (and aesthetic) quality to action towards environmental and social sustainability and can have "a significant affective, political or spiritual impact on self and others, often to a stated end but not always articulated in the work" (Light et al., 2018). Creative practices' ability to create situations that bring together stakeholders in co-creative, at times provocative, and situated exchange, they are well positioned to support transformative thinking and action.

Such transformative creative practices are, however, often fragmented, poorly resourced, and badly understood (Light et al., 2019). As such, they are currently under-utilised agents of transformation in society, ripe with the potential to be developed further to this end. In addition, Light et al. (2018) notice that sustainability-oriented creative practitioners and researchers are often unable to easily find and connect with each other across fields of practice and discipline. A part of our ongoing work has been to map and bring together diverse existing tools and resources that creative practitioners across multiple creative fields have been using in their work. We aim to investigate how, why, and with whom are such tools are being used, and help make resources available in ways that are useful for those involved in transformative creative practices. Our aim in doing this is to help identify ways that can improve the fragmented representation and understanding of socioecologically transformative creative practices. Our research is guided by the following question:

What are the possibilities and limits of the tools and resources that transformative creative practices use to reconceive and redesign forms of interaction between different disciplines, audiences and cultures?

A basic definition of a tool is an object that extends one's ability to transform features of a particular environment. Tools can have multiple forms (for example, tangible or imagined, inanimate or biological, object-based, performative and others), and can be reappropriated differently in different contexts. As social artefacts, tools embody particular ideologies, politics, and values, while at the same time shaping identities, interpersonal relationships, thought, and creative expression. Tools enable communication at multiple levels, serving purposes for which they were not originally intended (Mattern & Zubalsky, 2019), ranging from everyday-life purposes to supporting creative pursuits, as well as and détournement, a creative misuse, divergence or subversion of the existing expressions, as conceptualised by the revolutionary artistic movements Letterist International and subsequently Situationist International (Debord & Wolman, 1956).

Tools can become part of and enable access to resources, as evidenced in games, maps, cookbooks, zines, card decks, manifestos, lexicons, almanacs, guides, DIY protocols, performance scripts and more. Their adaptive and communicative qualities often make them particularly useful for participatory creative practice, enabling embodied and sensory forms of co-creative engagement with participants. These experiential modes of creative exchange can help engage participants, publics and communities more viscerally in thinking about sustainable transformation (Costanza-Chock, 2020; Light et al. 2018; Vervoort & Mangnus, 2018; Pelzer & Versteeg, 2019).

The aim of our work on tools and resources is not to make a definitive collection of examples, but to provide opportunities for creative practitioners to come together, become familiar with each other's work, and experiment with one another's tools. Our work is inspired by existing compilations of tools and resources for creative practitioners including, for instance, Shannon Mattern and Or Zubalsky's syllabi and teaching materials for their Tools seminar at The New School (Mattern & Or, 2020), a list of resources for critical technical practice, pedagogy and inventive methods compiled by Laura Forlano and collaborators (Forlano et al., n.d.), and the Covid Creatives Toolkit, initiated by Kit Braybrooke to provide a set of curated, time-specific, mostly free and open source resources to support creative practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic (#CovidCreativesToolkit, n.d.).

2. Feral Ways of Knowing and Transformation

In this contribution, we present preliminary findings from the transdisciplinary workshop Feral Ways of Knowing and Transformation, where participants shared their experiences of designing or using what they identified as tools and resources used within their creative practice, which they also self-identified as transformative. The workshop took place at the Uroboros Festival in May 2021, within the framework of CreaTures (Creative Practices for Transformational Futures), a European research project bringing together researchers and creative practitioners to explore the role of creative practice in socioecological transformations. Drawing on our ongoing research into the area of resources that inform and/or result from transformative creative work, the workshop's aim was to understand the qualities of tools for transformation from creative practitioners' perspectives. We invited a number of creative practitioners engaged with matters of socioecological transformation to each present and discuss one tool or resource, which they understood as 'feral'.

Feral as a concept can be ambiguous and invite multiple interpretations. In our work, feral broadly denotes the alternative, experimental, more-than-human, and wild, challenging the dominant ontological and epistemological discourses. In Feral Atlas (Tsing et al., 2020), Anna Tsing and colleagues see feral as "emerging within human-sponsored projects but are not in human control". Making a departure from the concept of 'in the wild' research, or science, Mike Michael (2017) suggests that feral can be used as a mode of engagement that, while having elements of domestication, operates within its own rules, 'beyond domestication'. Genevieve Bell (Tucker, 2016), reflecting on the history of how camels were initially imported to Australia for transportation then became feral with the introduction of locomotives, talks about data and technologies becoming feral, resulting in unintended consequences.

For our workshop, we intentionally left the definition of feral open and asked participants to present tools that they would consider feral and explain why. We also invited them to share stories about how they used these tools in their own practice. Participants presented a variety of tools they used, including card decks, experimental walks, gameplay guides, manuals, typologies, and metaphors, and suggested additional tools and projects they encountered and considered worth researching further.

Several tools took speculative design approaches. For example, Rachel Clarke introduced a Training Manual made for those wishing to join the fictional Ministry of Multispecies Communications, a participatory speculative workshop. The manual presents a near future scenario where all creatures have fled cities for safe refuge elsewhere. Invited participants perform as a team of secret government officials tasked with finding ways to make the environment better for the creatures to come back. The manual provides prompts and instructions for participating in the Ministry of Multispecies Communication, such as mask making activities and guided walks that can be organised as face-to-face or online events, using synchronous and asynchronous platforms such as WhatsApp (<https://www.whatsapp.com/>) and Slack (<https://slack.com/>). Lara Houston, Sara Heitlinger, Ruth

Catlow, and Alex Taylor presented The Algorithmic Food Justice Live Action Role Play Toolkit, developed to enable multispecies Live Action Role Plays (LARPs). The manual consists of an introduction, a guide to setting up a LARP, templates for the material and a series of scenarios to be used in the LARP. For her project Deep Phytocracy, Špela Petrič shared a toolkit consisting of cards instructing practitioners to embody different Anarchetypes – humorous and often absurd characters representing various real-world cultural values and approaches to plants.

Two projects presented at the workshop featured walks as their main resource. Kit Braybrooke and Emma O’Sullivan’s *Machine Ghosts* is a replicable model for a psychogeographic exploration in urban spaces. The tool explores the city as an algorithmic playground, unveiling the more-than-human encounters and histories that are typically overlooked in everyday life. Iryna Zamuruieva presented a methodology to conduct sensory walks focused on engaging with a place through smell, sight, touch & hearing that she co-developed in collaboration with community organisation Splce & ACC. In their toolkit, each sense has its own methodology composed of maps and guiding questions.

Leonardo Parra-Agudelo shared his use of a metaphor of “the sancocho” – a popular Colombian soup consisting of a broth and various ingredients that are placed on the table and then added to the broth by each person according to their preferences. Together with collaborators they are using ‘Sancocho’ as a conceptual platform to apply open, collaborative, and non-linear *sentipensar* (feel/thinking see Fals-Borda, 1980) - and acting - as something that can move beyond the human in various educational and design contexts, creating toolkits, urban plans, graphic novels and multispecies co-design methodologies.

Three main ways the participants used their tools are:

1. To foreground embodied, situated, and bottom-up ways of working with other-than-human, notably multispecies, entities, and issues that decentre human and human control;
2. To reappropriate creative processes in ways and for purposes different to the original intentions, and;
3. To accept, expect, enable and even encourage thoughts, feelings, and actions to develop in their own ways, beyond the creative practitioner’s (or anyone’s) control and social norms.

Reflecting on the ‘feralness’ of their work as a group allowed us to position creative practice in new ways; reflect on our engagement with issues of control and participation, and; the importance of creating and holding spaces for reimagining, dismantling, and reassembling alternative futures that are both critical and cautious of our own agendas. It reminds us to be attentive and responsive to things beyond human control, on-going, and open-ended. In this sense, *feral* provides a useful frame to help avoid binary thinking, and prioritize pluralism and uncertainty. These issues are crucial, especially when confronting the complex interrelations between socio-ecological issues and the role of creative practices (Dolejšová et al., 2021). There is an emerging orientation in the current discourse of transformative creative practice towards the More-than-Human (Forlano, 2017; Jaque et al., 2020; Choi & Galloway, 2021), anti-colonial (Escobar, 2018; Tsing et al., 2020) and anti-oppressive (Van Amstel et al., 2021), moving away from human-centric understanding and interaction with the world. We believe that the term *feral* helps expand, and at the same time complicate, these emerging orientations.

To expand this ongoing research we plan to develop other workshops centered on mapping more diverse tools and resources for transformative creative practice. These workshops will allow us to explore further how feralness can be animated in creative practices to enable the shared imagining of more-than-human futures, encourage actions toward socio-ecological transformations, and cultivate pluralism in meanings and feelings. Our aim with this work is to develop a more nuanced understanding of how transformational creative practices can take place in different social contexts and environments,

as the first humble step in supporting a change towards more inclusive, liveable, and regenerative futures.

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