



NORTH LIGHT ARTS

Is Soil Alive?

John Muir
Fellowship
2021-2022

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Executive Summary

North Light Arts works with artists in the community to reconnect people with their environment and to raise awareness around the issues of sustainability.

Five years ago we invited Natalie Taylor to be our Artist in Residence during the International Year of the Soil, and in the year of COP 26 in Glasgow we were able to consolidate our work with this essential theme. The Fellowship led to an exhibition at Dunbar Town House Gallery in June 2022, and responded to events in Glasgow – Cop26 and the ‘World Congress of Soil Science’ 2022.

The project’s total participants number approximately 1,680 people.

The project delivered ground-breaking art-science research, landmark art works and workshops, enthusiastic community responses, new artistic and community partnerships, and a renewed shared sense of urgency around soil health. Access and inclusion were successful in safe partnerships but continue to be a priority for future projects.

Our social media analytics indicate that we have had a reach and engagement far beyond our prior impact. Our reach on Facebook was an incredible 22,447, improving our previous impact by a factor of 221.5%. Our Facebook page visits increased by 143.4% to 808 across the year. Similarly our Instagram reach increased by 100% to 1,483 and we enjoyed 666 profile visits, up by 100%.

Recommendations include:

- Follow up on the partnerships and potential in the art works (such as touring and further research) that have been seeded in this project.
- Open up alternative models of public sharing that enact exhibition in varied ways, including non-gallery spaces.
- Sponsor future reflective events within the art sector, eg panel discussions or round tables, in order to refine NLA’s role in the hybrid field of art and ecology / biodiversity. Tap into the existing conversations and knowledge sharing within the art sector about this through attending online discussions.

Context

The Fellowship

North Light Arts works with artists in the community to reconnect people with their environment and to raise awareness around the issues of sustainability. Five years ago we invited Natalie Taylor to be our Artist in Residence during the International Year of the Soil, and in the year of COP 26 in Glasgow we were able to consolidate our work with this essential theme.

The John Muir Fellowship 2021-2022, "Is Soil Alive?" provided a Fellowship for artist Natalie Taylor to consolidate her skills as an environmental artist, developing though research with scientists, specialists and the community, a new body of work.

Using local soil as a creative medium, a broad range of activities and artistic methods demonstrated the power of art to seed ideas, explore the role of 'soil' in our health and wellbeing, and forged new partnerships to develop practical responses to the negative impacts of our life styles.

The Fellowship led to an exhibition at Dunbar Town House Gallery in June 2022, and responded to events in Glasgow – Cop26 and the 'World Congress of Soil Science' 2022.

As this project was in plan, Covid-19 was still an unpredictable and all-consuming force across the community. Our contingencies were flexible, to respond to unknown prospects created by potential lockdowns or compromised attendance. As events unfolded, we were able to roll out the programme as we had intended, in fact accommodating even more community involvement and more responsive practice than we had imagined.

We could not also have anticipated the passion and interest that COP 26 was to generate amongst our audiences. New connections, ideas and support around the time of preparation for COP26 generated an artistic swell within the Fellowship, resulting in the landmark works of the Cape, the Pilgrimage and the character of the Keeper of the Soil.

"Long live soil & you
inspirations x"

Visitor's Book Comment

North Light Arts

Over the course of the past ten years North Light Arts has delivered a broad and varied range of activities focused on the community and environments of Dunbar. Our aim to act as a catalyst for change and connection has informed all our work but the projects most closely aligned with our current theme include the 2015 conference 'Fertile Ground' which brought from all over the UK those with an interest in arts and the environment and working for change with people and communities, Natalie Taylor's Residency 'Alchemy of Soil' in 2015 – the International Year of the Soil and the 2018 Residency 'Homing' with Dalziel+Scullion.

Dunbar is perfectly positioned to be a site for such activity, with a rich and long history of ecological scholarship and activism, arts and community engagement.

"There is an implicit ask of the audience to participate in my hope."

Fellowship Artist, Natalie Taylor

"I hope that the pilgrimage has inspired people to understand that we do have agency...I think that was a really great community gathering of spirit."

Fellowship Artist, Natalie Taylor

Natalie Taylor

"Using materials as sustainably as possible, I create art and deliver workshops which aim to inspire self-expression, challenge thinking, and bring people together. My work relies on my meticulous research and planning – particularly in location-based projects.

While I'm deeply passionate I am also very sensitive to the differing cultural aspects of art and community outreach when tackling issues. Collaboration is a key element of all my work.

Having trained as a sculptor, I see potential within every material for communication. I love to push the boundaries of sculpture, by using living plants to 'speak' to us through language written in flowers. I find this particularly compelling in urban and city locations.

The intersection between art and science is a recurring theme in my art, pushing me to explore and highlight the delicate balance humanity hangs in."

Fellowship Artist, Natalie Taylor

What was sown?

1

A full calendar year of events

The year of the Fellowship ran from September 2021 to July 2022, and provided over 20 high impact and engaging activities.

2

Workshops and Exhibition

The Fellowship's activities numbered over 20 inspiring events, including a pilgrimage to COP26 in Glasgow, a host of informative and pleasurable workshops, meals, talks and a full exhibition.

3

Engagement on social media

Our reach and engagement via social media surpassed our expectations, offering us new pathways of development for future projects.

4

Artist and community benefits

One main intention of the Fellowship was to offer research opportunities to our artist. This enabled us to support a high quality new body of work. We also aim to bring benefits to our local community through this artistic journey.

Location

Name & Date of event

Seedling

What came up for you?

Description

How did it look / feel?

Growing Instructions

If this is a seed to grow further, how can we (North Light Arts) create the best conditions for it to thrive?

Workshops & Events

The workshops garnered feedback via a plant label exercise and also a feedback form following a plant description format. This section reports the combined responses.

Guide question: What came up for you in this event?

We found that responses to the guide question ranged broadly in their themes, outlining numerous positive benefits and experiences of the events. Most participants wrote single words or phrases, with some occasionally offering short haiku style poems or sentences of description. Many of the plant labels were decorated with additional images. The following categories have emerged as themes of what was sown by the Fellowship:

- Connection / community / relationships
- Interest / knowledge
- Health / wellbeing / soul
- Inspiration / motivation
- Confidence / freedom
- Family time
- High quality experience
- Gratitude
- Bigger Picture / Something greater
- Fun / Pleasure / Happiness
- Reconnection with earth and tradition
- Soil / Biodiversity

Exhibition

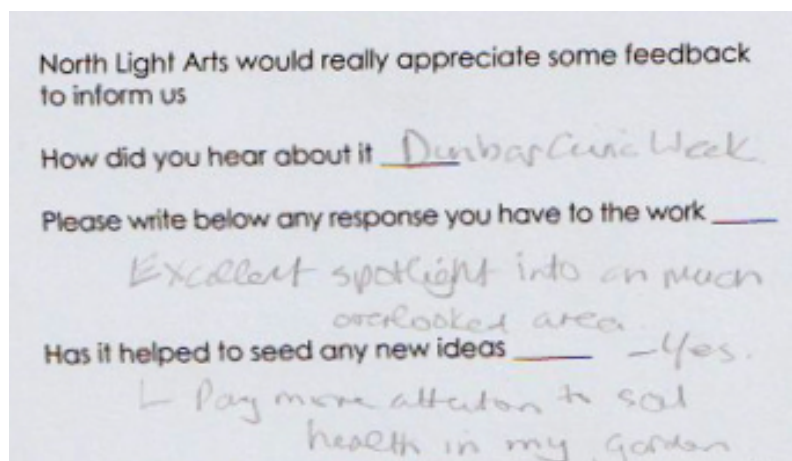
The Fellowship exhibition also garnered specific feedback via postcards and its visitor's book.

This section reports responses to the question:

Q: Has it helped to seed any new ideas?

Attendees overall reported that the exhibition inspired them to:

- seek volunteering opportunities
- find out more about soil
- support their children's interests in knowing / doing more
- to encourage others
- make more art
- improve their garden / vegetable growing



Exhibition

This section reports responses to the postcard prompt "Any response you have to the work" and from free comments in the visitor's book.

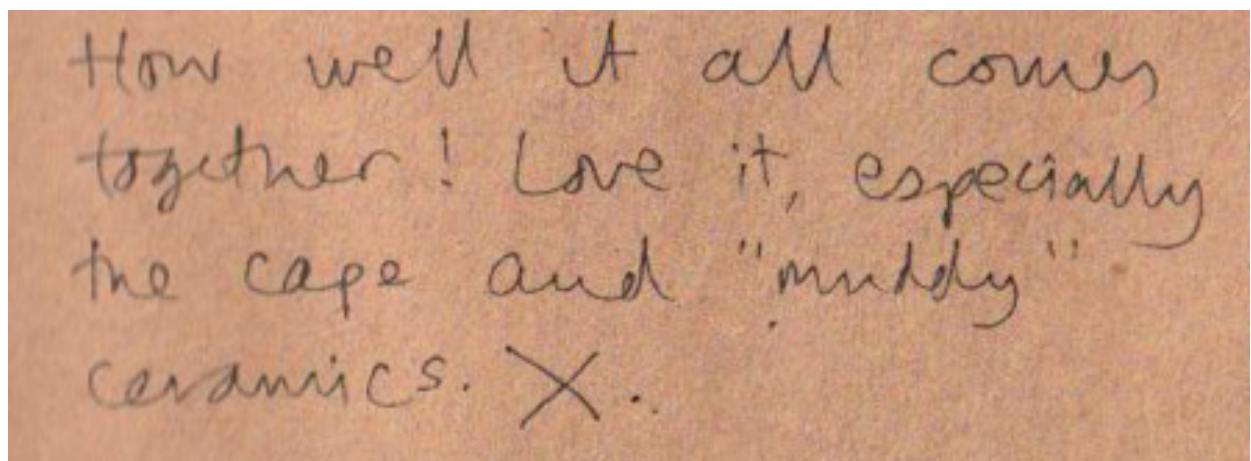
Attendees wrote that the work was:

- Fascinating
- Inspiring
- Enlightening, informative
- Fabulous, awesome
- Thought provoking
- Useful
- Beautiful
- Well-planned
- Enjoyable
- Moving

"Such an amazing creative work...

Natalie has managed to bring together different perspectives & interactions with the soil & reveal its hidden life so vital to our existence. Brilliant."

Visitor's Book Comment



We consider our social media impact to be an important part of what was sown by the Fellowship. Our social media analytics indicate that we have had a reach and engagement far beyond our prior impact, expanding the in-person impact in our locality. Our reach on Facebook was an incredible 22,447, improving our previous impact by a factor of 221.5%. Our Facebook page visits increased by 143.4% to 808 across the year. Similarly our Instagram reach increased by 100% to 1,483 and we enjoyed 666 profile visits, up by 100%.

Social Media

All figures relate to the full fellowship period of August 2021 – July 2022.



22,447

Our reach on
Facebook

12,057

Our top Facebook
post reach

808

Facebook page visits

We consider this a significant part of the Fellowship's success because of the type of engagement we have had with not only participants but also supporters, potential future participants and audiences, and those farther afield who have special interests in our area of activity. We also recognise this is a potential area of impact for our interim periods when there is no active project underway.

Our top hit for reach was on 7th March, featuring the cape, worn by a Keeper of the Soil, during a walk in the woodland after Storm Arwen.

Artist & Community



What did the Fellowship provide to artist Natalie Taylor?

The Board's intention in the project was to provide artist Natalie Taylor "with a vehicle...based on the funding and our connections with the community".

Research was a key element of the vehicle that the project intended to offer the artist. The project did provide the input from scientists that it intended, but this was heavily impacted upon by unforeseen circumstances. Specifically, the effects of unpredictable project timing, and changes in employment posts in partner scientific institutions, required some careful planning and flexibility. These circumstances, combined with the breadth of research, generated what Natalie Taylor describes as, "complex, confusing, vast amounts of information" to navigate.

It is testament to the passion and commitment of the team that this was accomplished and created such a successful outcome.

The team's collective choice to add the pilgrimage to the project created a situation in which the team was delivering "two projects for the price of one". The unexpected benefit of this was that the project was felt to have reached national, and perhaps international, significance. The COP 26 plan was a response to a stakeholder connection. This was an unexpected thread, and yet became arguably the strongest public output of the project.

Artist & Community

What did the Fellowship sow across the community and beyond?

The project delivered several strong partnerships within Dunbar: “We have strong springboard partnerships, laid so many community seeds down” (Natalie Taylor). These partnerships are now available to NLA and to artist Natalie Taylor, offering a rich potential of future work. Much of the project’s success would not have happened without the central Project Manager role.

The project led to strong working relationships with local poets. This has inspired considerable amounts of new artistic work. The creative workshops gave diverse people a sense of what is in soil, what they can eat in the wild, and the opportunity to hear other knowledges. Already spin off projects organised by local people are happening.

As regarding building resilience across the community, Dunbar is already an active community in which many people are already attuned to that agenda. This project has contributed to the conversation. On a broad level, it touches on art’s power and role to change society:

Ecology and biodiversity...It’s all wrapped up... I’m hoping that (this work) will inspire people to protect it...it’s an emotional position

Fellowship Artist, Natalie Taylor

...the symbolism of the soil, and the symbolism of the cloak, that’s been very profound and has touched a lot of people

Fellowship Artist, Natalie Taylor

Some activities in the project however were limited in accessibility for people with mobility issues. This relates mainly to the walks and foraging workshops. The aspiration to include migrant communities on a systemic level will rely on a more specialist connection with partner groups in future.

The project did however reach people living with mental health and addiction issues, thanks to its longstanding and caring partnerships. The project also made innovative use of its connection with Flux, a local shop, for the exchange of stitching packs; and also with Belhaven Gardens, The Ridge and local growers. Access and inclusion remains a firm aspiration for future projects.

How did it look / feel?

How did participation in the Fellowship feel? What was said in the feedback beyond the words themselves? As a participatory arts organisation, we are also interested in wider ways of expression among our participants.

We found that responses to the guide question ranged in the manner in which they were presented. Participants clearly felt that something more than words was required to communicate the impact of the event they attended.

Participants described their experiences in diverse creative ways;

The use of CAPS by several participants seems to underscore a depth of feeling generated by their experience. The use of exclamation marks by several participants also seemed to underscore a depth of impact.

The use of drawings by many participants, notably the drawing of smiley faces, hearts, flowers, plants, idea clouds, sunny landscapes, decoration, and a light bulb. This seems to suggest that the sessions brought participants into a register of art and expression, not only one of information and knowledge.

The use of poetic forms such as haiku, and other short forms, also suggest that the sessions brought participants into an artistic register, not only one of information and knowledge.

The tendency to cover all parts of the label and feedback form with words or images, with participants making use of all their resources, going beyond boundaries, feeling an overflow of response.



What will make it grow?

How can we create the best conditions for these seeds of art and ecology to thrive?

Overwhelmingly, participants felt that more workshops would be valuable in growing the seeds that have been planted and nurtured by the Fellowship. They encourage North Light Arts to “keep doing what you are doing”, and beyond that, participants turned the focus back to their own lives, seemingly inspired to change how they live. Participants wrote that the seeds of the Fellowship will grow in the following ways:

- More workshops
- Continuing the current approach
- Nurturing personal arts practices
- Nurturing personal use of plants and garden
- Expanding the workshops in further ways locally
- Returning to the project to continue the exploration
- “Everyone should have their own cape”
- Volunteering culture

Why did people book places on project events?

Comments from the booking website show that people were motivated to participate because the Fellowship offered:

- Inspiring new and different ideas
- Attractive arts & craft activities
- High quality experiences
- Engagement with relevant topics
- Family time
- Local activity

How did board members reflect on the growing conditions of the Fellowship?

In considering the conditions that made the Fellowship a success, and that might continue to nurture its impact, the board reflected that the project had a particular impact due to its accessibility by children and families. They also noticed that audiences made a strong link with the project and its topic through contact in spaces beyond the art world, such as shop windows and everyday high street interactions. Conversely, an additional surprise was the unexpected role of digital media in sharing information and building community.

Going Forward

Estimate more time and flexibility for research and production periods.

Consider adopting a Project Manager role again in future.

Follow up on the partnerships that have been seeded in this project.

Open up alternative models of public sharing that enact exhibition in varied ways, including non-gallery spaces.

Consider sequels to this fellowship, involving developments of the topic.

Explore funding and potential sites for touring the key works.

Celebrate the breadth of artistic impact that this project has had, but consider the potential impact of broad artistic ambitions on the team as a whole.

Sponsor future reflective events within the art sector, eg panel discussions or round tables, in order to refine NLA's role in the hybrid field of art and ecology / biodiversity. Tap into the existing conversations and knowledge sharing within the art sector about this through attending online discussions.

Consider and trial accessibility not only from a physical mobility perspective but from a broader understanding of what this might involve for the organisation and its activities, ie., in terms of audiences that identify with other protected characteristics.

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Soil Donations

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Keepers of the Soil



Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the contributions of the people who worked tirelessly on the projects mentioned within.

Project Manager, Toni Dickson

Fellowship Artist, Natalie Taylor

Our **colleagues** from Local and Partner Organizations

North Light Arts

www.northlightarts.com