

Editorial

Creative Writing and Art Toward an Eco-poetics of Randomness and Design

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In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), Walter Benjamin famously claims that the position of the audience at movie theaters requires an attention devoid of contemplation, without the *aura* traditionally attributed to a work of art. The film spectator can be thus both distracted and receptive: the new mode of perception Benjamin attaches to movies is in fact a “reception in a state of distraction,” wherein “the public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one” (18). In other words, when we watch a movie we are not a (human) subject before an (artistic) object, we rather enter into a state of semi-trance in which a new perceptive (and for Benjamin, political) event is made possible by the lack of fixed, preconceived boundaries between the self and the other (see Duttingler 276-277).

Odd as it may sound, Benjamin’s thesis always comes to mind any time I go mushrooming. From a young age I used to accompany my grandmother into the forest to look for edible mushrooms. As I learnt with time, to see the mushrooms one must indeed be receptive in a state of distraction, examining the surrounding environment, but in an almost absent-minded way, focusing on the task on hand, but also enjoying the frivolous and aimless act of strolling—or the *flânerie*, to use another of Benjamin’s key terms. The perception established by such a practice breaks down the division between present enjoyment and future (gastronomic) interest; irrational wandering and strategic planning; randomness and ecological knowledge. On the epistemological level, mushrooming thus becomes a hybrid aesthetic experience through which boundaries are dynamic rather than fixed: as mycologist Alan Rayner has pointed out in a more biological context, I can also say that mushrooms have taught me to appreciate “the enormous significance of indeterminacy or ‘open-endedness’ amongst all kinds of life forms” (vii).

A similar stance on mushrooms has been recently taken by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Tsing writes about the “art of noticing” mushrooms as a practice in which we give up the alleged linearity of human progress to instead pay attention to those instances where indeterminacy gives birth to “multiple time-making projects, as organisms enlist each other and coordinate in making landscape” (21). In these open-ended and polyphonic gatherings she calls “assemblages,” we stop focusing exclusively on teleological categories created by

anthropocentrism and instead begin noticing those “histories that develop through contamination,” in which “interwoven rhythms perform a still lively temporal alternative to the unified progress-time we still long to obey” (29; 34). As with Benjamin’s movies, with mushrooms we leave behind the centrality of our human perspective and the teleological continuum of human time, to enter into a nomadic world of assemblages in which randomness and enchanting lines-of-flight are in control as much as regular configurations.

The works included in the Creative Writing and Art section of this issue of *Ecozon@* devoted to “Ecopoetics of Randomness and Design” share with Benjamin’s movies and Tsing’s mushrooms the ability to evoke both contemplation and distraction; progress and indeterminacy; bio-technological randomness but also artistic design. Going back to the etymological common origin of the Greek word “poiein” (to make) with Sanskrit “cinoti” (to gather, to heap up), these works of art are in fact human-made, but also gather and collect more-than-human worlds. Like mushrooming, each of them is indeed a gathering that, through ecopoetic contamination, becomes “a ‘happening’, that is, greater than a sum of its parts” (Tsing 27).

It is no coincidence that this section of *Ecozon@* opens with a series of digital pictures of mushrooms and mold elaborated by the Montreal-based French visual artist, Ophélie Queffurus. As shown by the image on the cover, Queffurus’s works deal with the dynamic boundaries between art and biology, and with the possibility of their reciprocal ecopoetic contamination. By designing and initiating what would appear to be a biological experiment in a scientific setting, Queffurus allows microbiological, nonhuman agents to create efficient networks that are also aesthetically stunning. From the electric blue of the cover image to the yellow growths of the *Physarum Polycephalum* in her most recent work, Queffurus’ art wanders between traditional and new artistic media to promote what she calls “a more spatializing conception of living practices,” no longer seen as “a line between two disciplines (art and biotechnology) but more as a common space.” The outcome is a series of astonishing world-making ecologies, polyphonic assemblages capable of revealing the conceptual, epistemological, and material space “in-between” (human) design and (nonhuman) randomness.

This “in-betweenness” also characterizes the two subsequent art projects. The first is the result of a collaboration between Judith Tucker and Harriet Tarlo. Tarlo is a poet and Reader in Creative Writing at Sheffield Hallam University with an interest in landscape, place and environment. Tucker is for her part an artist and senior lecturer in the School of Design at the University of Leeds. Her work explores the juncture of social history, personal memory and geography; it investigates their relationship through drawing, painting and writing. Since 2013, Tarlo and Tucker have worked on and with a contested coastal community on one of the UK’s last existing ‘plotlands’, the Humberston Fitties in North East Lincolnshire. The painting and poems that they submitted to *Ecozon@* are from the series “Night Fitties,” which explores the play of light and dark and the uncanny transformations of the chalets that take place after hours, as well as notions of vulnerability, occupation and emptiness. As the two artists point out in their introduction, their cross-disciplinary collaborative practice between poetry and visual

art explores open, environmentally-aware engagements and methodologies with landscape and place. In investigating the relationship between social, environmental and energy politics on micro and macro scales, their work delves into the effects of radical open form text and paintings, and how their reciprocal contamination and indeterminacy challenge audiences' assumptions about boundaries and linearity.

A similar ecopoetic gathering is at the very core of Daniel Eltringham and David Walker Barker's contribution. Eltringham, a poet, teaches contemporary literature at the University of Sheffield, while Walker Baker is an artist and collector interested in geology, landscape evolution and collecting. As they write in their abstract for *Ecozon@*, their collaborative project entitled *Searching for Jossie* explores the Pennine reservoir landscapes and partially drowned communities of Langsett and Midhope, ten miles north-west of Sheffield (UK). The project comprises Eltringham's poetic sequence *R/S Res.*, and a collaborative cabinet artwork, a playful take on the elusive "Jossie cabin," a vanished shepherd's hut that gives the work its title and pretext and that had stood on the moorland above Langsett Reservoir. *Searching for Jossie* juxtaposes objects found on walks in those landscapes with text-and-image slates that work archival photographs and *R/S Res.* into a textured surface. Their contribution to *Ecozon@* presents a selection of these slates, some with text and some without, alongside Eltringham's sequence in full. Both Eltringham's poem and Walker Barker's palimpsestic technique delve into these landscapes' geology, ecology and human histories, enacting imaginative reconstructions of a scarcely legible landscape marked by loss as well as interrogating a poetics of reserve and resource. Eltringham's poem's imperfect grid form is an exploration of randomness and design as an experiment in place-writing: as he writes, it peters out in the face of chance findings and failures, and finds its ecopoetic significance in narrating both what is left of a field-system that has itself been partially erased, neglected and naturalized, and the absences that seep through the little that is known.

Our forth contribution is three poems by Frances Presley—a poet and freelance translator who has published several books of poetry since the late 1980s. They are taken from a forthcoming book based on the life of nineteenth-century English mathematician and writer Ada Lovelace. The sequence I have chosen for this issue of *Ezocon@* is rooted in landscapes which are significant for both Presley and Lovelace, and focuses on two themes—wave function and the will o' the wisp (an atmospheric ghost light seen by travelers at night)—as examples of unpredictable natural phenomena interwoven with complex scientific theory. As exemplified by the first text in the series, "wave function," these poems combine mathematical theory and a scientific approach to the physical world ("the difficulty of measuring a wave function") with an aesthetic sensibility capable of recognizing the beauty embedded in the landscaping function of chance. The result is an original artistic practice that acknowledges the potential friction between design and randomness both in the physical world and in poetry, as well as the agency of an environment that shares with the poet the ability to write and thus narrate its own stories.

While within Presley's work and the two previous collaborative projects water plays a key role, the last two contributions bring us back to more mushroom-prone but

equally polyphonic habitats. *Flower Poems? or Cobridme de flores* is a series of poems written by Robin Murray, a poet and a Professor of English and Film Studies at Eastern Illinois University. As the overall title suggests, almost all the poems in the series are about both real flowers, often described as a collective presence, and flowers as metaphor for love and almost mystical entities, transfiguring death. The Portuguese part of the title can be in fact roughly translated as “Cover me with flowers” and it is probably a reference to a poem by Sister Maria do Ceo (1658–1753), a Portuguese nun, poet, writer, and playwright who combined a Baroque attention to detail and allegory with religious sensibility. Murray’s poems mirror the dark beauty of Maria’s lyric and mix the different allegorical levels of the flowers mentioned with anecdotal references to the actual life of the poet. As in a garden occasionally attended where the original design has given away to structural randomness, the result is a set of poems that avoid fixed boundaries between the physical and the metaphorical work of the senses as well as between human and nonhuman existences.

Moving from gardens to forests, our last contribution is an excerpt from a long poem entitled *Tree*, written by writer and research fellow at the University of New England (Australia), John Charles Ryan. The five poems (from a longer sequence of 24 sonnets all devoted to trees) that Ryan chose for *Ecozon@* reflect his scholarly interest in investigating the potential of poetic practices capable of inspiring understanding of the natural world and redefining human-plant relationships. In particular, the ecopoetic strategy Ryan employs fits nicely within the general theme of this issue. On the one hand, the five poems are designed to be not only sonnets (likely the poetic form that requires the most planning) but also about a specific topic, trees. On the other hand, they are also the linguistic embodiment of polymorphous, polyphonic vegetal assemblages: to quote a few lines from the first poem anthologized here, each of them does “Prosper [...] through plurality” as they all collectively envision a random botanic force capable of rightly claiming that “allthingsthingsings repeated in everything else.” In other words, Ryan’s poems simultaneously imply and corrode the alleged boundaries between nature and culture, gesturing toward an indeterminate kaleidoscope of life-forms and harmonic world-making projects.

Although fungi are only flickering elements in Ryan’s poems, their smell is undoubtedly present among his trees. As Tsing has noted, the combination of ineffability and presence is evident in mushrooms’ smell, which is another reason why we find them (43). The artworks I gathered for this issue of *Ecozon@* share with mushrooms and mushrooming this other aspect: they, too, not only represent but are part of a world that is beyond and within our reach, a world that is governed by both design and randomness, and in which humans are part of larger life-projects where we neither have total control (thankfully) nor are simply neutral observers or contemplators. As for finding mushrooms, the rich but at times disturbing aroma of the works in the Creative Writing and Art section of this issue of *Ecozon@* can only gesture toward an ecopoetics without fixed boundaries that likely will be never “here” but always “in-between,” never fully completed by constantly becoming. Yet, as once again it is for mushrooms, the ecological stories they narrate are not isolated but gather diverse things and meaning

and value and, let's hope, "never end, but rather lead to further stories," to further world-making projects and assemblages (Tsing 287).

Works Cited

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