

Introduction

A SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART PRACTICE USING MATERIAL EMPATHY

Introduction

Plantstallation is a socially engaged art practice using material empathy that focuses on building confidence and wellbeing. This practice features the rich and varied plant life native to Scotland and brings together the plants' unique symbolism, historic use, plant lore, and contemporary status. Using Scottish plants in combination with other objects and materials that are meaningful to you or relate to the plants in some way, artworks known as *plantstallations* are assembled. The aim is to build up your confidence through this creative activity whilst also strengthening your relationship with the natural world and foster positive exchanges with others working through the practice just as you are.

As an arts practitioner, I've been very interested in combining my passion for socially engaged art practices with my love of the natural world and its restorative power. This digital publication contains each component of the *plantstallation* practice. There are six parts: 'Introduction', 'Ritual & Ritual Objects', 'Material Empathy', 'A Practical Guide to Making Your Plantstallation', 'Exploring the Meaning of Plants through Plantstallations', and 'My Plantstallation Notebook'. These components form a toolkit for you to enter the world of the plantstallation practice and create your own, whilst boosting your confidence and wellbeing.

The inspiration for this socially engaged practice comes from my experience of spending time in the Scottish landscape over the past year and learning via



personal interaction with the natural world. I would come away from the woods, mountains, or beach, feeling re-energised and more at-ease, brimmed with positive energy, my mind quiet. I am aware that this is nothing unique to me; many scientifically proven therapeutic practices, such as Ikebana or botanical arranging, associate time spent in the natural world with a corresponding reduction in stress and anxiety, and overall increased wellbeing (Kopytin, Bockhorni, and Zhou, 2019).

For more than 600 years, the practice of Ikebana has been one of the most important traditional Japanese arts. Ikebana is, in the simplest terms, flower-arranging. But it goes way beyond the western concept of floristry, where large numbers of various flowers are grouped into a colourful display. Ikebana is centred around human interaction with nature. The ultimate aim of the practice is to facilitate a mind-body experience that encourages health and wellbeing: 'Immersion in the physical practice of this art can lead to both psychological and spiritual emptiness (no-self), which is thought to be the source of skillful action and the basis for empathetic and ethical behaviour' (Kopytin, Bockhorni, and Zhou, 2019).

Recently, there has been an increase in art therapies rooted in the environment (e.g. eco art psychotherapy, environmental arts therapy, and botanical arranging). These are used in both clinical and non-clinical settings for therapeutic, rehabilitation, and preventive purposes (Kopytin, Bockhorni, and Zhou, 2019). As the world's human population becomes more urbanised, medical clinicians are seeking out strategies to encourage more contact with nature for their clients.

Interactions with nature support the development of humans: cognitively, emotionally, spiritually, and aesthetically (Burls, 2007), (Heerwagen, 2009). One form of a

therapeutic arts practice rooted in nature is botanical arranging. Botanical arranging is a therapeutic arts practice firmly rooted in nature, and which is connected both conceptually and practically to Ikebana. Botanical arranging gets its theoretical foundation from research from therapy and psychology that is related to art, ecology, and horticulture. Organic materials are used: flowers, greenery, or other botanical specimens. These are configured as a means to work in a metaphorical and artistic modality. The practice also includes a practitioner, an art therapist or another type of facilitator, to guide the client's artistic creation of botanical arrangements. The client then discusses the artwork and what meaning may be embedded within it. Essentially, organic materials are used with an art therapy approach.

For this digital publication I've taken some influence from botanical arranging and approached it from a different angle. The first step in the process of creating your own plantstallation is to gain an understanding of the traditional symbolism, meaning, and popular uses for various species of plants native to Scotland. The specific plants you will select for use depends on what symbol, meaning, or theme that you wish to explore and work with. For example, the juniper tree is a symbol of endurance, so it might be chosen by someone preparing for a marathon or making an arduous journey. They would then bring in an object or materials that relate to the idea of endurance in some personal way. Or, a person might take a cutting from an aspen tree, a symbol of communication. Perhaps they want to strengthen a relationship in their life or wish to keep in touch with family. An object to support this meaning could be an envelope, a phone, or a two-way radio. These items (the plant cutting and the object(s) or materials) are then creatively arranged or worked with and they become the elements of the plantstallation.

Invite



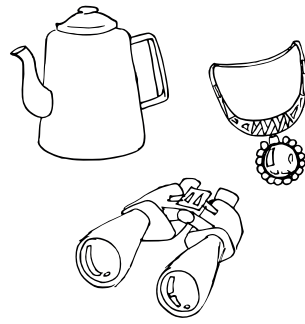
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Forage



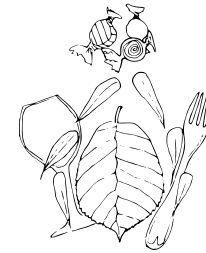
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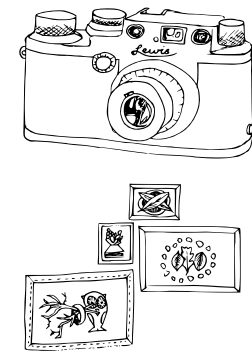
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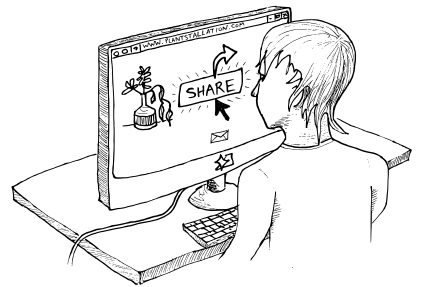
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Document



Share



I touch on the use of ritual and the idea of ritual objects within this project. At its core, the plantstallations, and the ritualistic structure of creating them, form a meaningful act, done with intent. When understanding the meaning or symbolism of a plant, for example, you will relate your personal values to those meanings. (Mulder, 2019).

The concept of material empathy also plays a vital role in the plantstallation practice because understanding materials and our relationship with them will change how we work with them as art objects or elements. The theory behind material empathy comes from the principles of relational aesthetics which, 'take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations' (Bourriaud, 1998), and empathy, the 'human ability to feel with others' (Batson, 2009) and a 'means of attending to the aesthetic properties of things' (Currie, 2011).

A major aim of the entire plantstallation practice is to boost self confidence and trust in your abilities. By engaging with nature, working with the plants and materials, and joining a community of people also interested in this practice, making plantstallations can increase self-trust which enables you to be confident in your abilities.

I hope this digital publication gives you inspiration and tools to guide you as you explore the natural world through this plantstallation practice. After collecting your plant cuttings and objects or materials, working creatively to make plantstallations will strengthen the connection between your personal life, your surroundings, and others with you on the journey.

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