

In addition to the day job...

Miranda Whall is an artist and lecturer in the School of Art. She is passionate about using artistic performance to bring new audiences into conversations about the climate emergency. One wet and windy weekend in August, she live-streamed from a ditch high in the Cambrian Mountains to raise awareness of the plight of our upland areas. ABER News spoke to Miranda about the experience and her work:

Tell us a bit about the Soil Voices project?

Soil Voices was the creative component of a Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) funded discipline hopping project titled *Making the invisible visible: Instrumenting and interpreting an upland landscape for climate change resilience*. The Aberystwyth University academic team were myself, Professor Andrew Thomas from Geography and Earth Sciences, Dr Fred Labrosse from Computer Science, Professor Mariecia Fraser from IBERS; and Dr Pete Todd from Mathematics.

My role in the project was to visualise and present high-resolution soil sensor technology data from a new sensor network to be installed over 3 sites on the land managed by Pwllpeiran Upland Research Centre.

My aim was to offer a new perspective on the scientific research by literally embedding my body into the landscape to embody the physical, material, and technological aspects of the project. I wanted to entangle myself with the soil and its statistics to become a creature of the mud, the matter, the flesh of the world and embodied technology simultaneously, a kind of cyborg, a human, animal, plant, and machine.

My hope was that a decentred, non-hierarchical, and interconnected perspective would enable audiences to listen, literally and metaphorically, to what the earth is telling us about its condition and how it needs to be managed and protected to sustain human, animal, vegetal, fungal, and bacterial livelihoods as we move into more extreme and unpredictable weather conditions.

Miranda helping to install the soil sensor network with Dr Fred Labrosse and Dr Pete Todd, Pwllpeiran Upland Research Centre. Photo by Dr Pete Todd, August 2022



I lay amidst the soil sensor network in a pre-prepared self-dug 2ft ditch on the plateau known as the Ffridd (the upland fringe) at 600m approx. On the hour every hour, for about 30 minutes each time, I received and recited the data from the sensors through headphones via Dr Pete Todd's specially built 'talkie box'. The data stream communicated the fluctuating soil moisture and soil temperature readings from each sensor every fifteen minutes. The durational performance was intended to be 24 hours, sadly, but maybe prophetically, the tech failed me and so I performed for 13 hours from 3pm on Saturday 12 August to 4am on Sunday 13 August.

I livestreamed the durational performance via social media so that the event would be accessible, both to cultivate a sense of global togetherness and to occupy a platform that is synonymous with a limited attention span. I wanted people to drop into the livestream whenever they could for as long or little as they wanted, offering audiences freedom to experience my locatedness, my rootedness



Soil Voices rehearsal, Pwllpeiran Upland Research Centre. Photo by Ashley Calvert, August 2022

in physical, environmental, and geographical terms in relation to their own location, mobility and transience. I liked the idea of becoming a stationary reference point, proposing a kind of new temporal and spatial mapping. I wanted my global audience to experience my presence as continuous, just as we trust that the sun or moon will always be there, I wanted to be there, as a constant. I believe this reflects our relationship with the soil, i.e., we cannot fully comprehend that it will not be there, healthy, and fertile, whenever we need it, and for as long as we need it.

Can you describe what it was like in the ditch?

While very snug and cosy in my dry suit in the ditch, I was preoccupied with a number of things: I was listening to the squeaking, crackling, scratching, spitting and hissing of the radio frequency interference in the 'talkie box', which often fooled me into thinking that a frog or mouse had fallen into the ditch; I was watching the frenzied fighting grasses bash each other repeatedly above my eyes; when there was light I was watching the clouds, when it was dark I was watching the rain, and feeling it tickling my face; I was imagining extra-terrestrial life signalling to me through a kind of mycorrhizal network of electrical currents in the earth; I was anxious about the 'talkie box' failing; I was anxious I wouldn't be able to recite the digits as they came through to me too thick and fast; and I was thinking about the friends, family and strangers who had been sending me messages on Facebook from all over the world. Overall it was a profoundly moving experience.

You describe your work as 'gentle activism' and 'silent protest'. Can you explain this?

In her essay *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), in which the concept of the cyborg represents the rejection of the separation of human from animal and human from machine, Donna Haraway said that "we must learn to stay with the trouble". By this she meant that living and

dying together on a damaged earth will prove more conducive to the kind of thinking that would provide the means to building more liveable futures. The umbrella title for my current projects is *Co-becoming: multispecies mingling and the art of attentiveness*; my intention for these projects is to explore "staying with the trouble" - I interpret this to mean getting down, getting in, being together and paying attention. To protest is to make a statement or action expressing disapproval of or objection to something; my protest or request is a gentle reminder to us all to slow down, get down, and pay attention to our non-human cohabitants, I am arguing for sentiocentrism over anthropocentrism.



When I was up there in the ditch, I was mingling with microorganisms and vegetal beings. To be still and enmeshed with other species for a slightly beyond usual and comfortable duration of time, a 24-hour cycle, is to propose an alternative way of thinking and being. The temporary close encounter I had with the ecosystem within and around the ditch was a great privilege; the work was an attempt to share my privileged vantage point.

Activism tries to bring about social and political change; my gentle activism, a removal of myself from the business as usual, a lie-in protest of sorts, is an attempt to encourage a change in perspective to enable a change in thinking and ultimately a change in behaviour. In this work I wanted to "materially collide, congeal, morph, evolve and disintegrate" to quote Michael Serres in his book *The Birth of Physics*,

to directly explore material entanglement, to explore a new position for ourselves in the order of things.

Like much of your work, 'Soil Voices' was a hybrid art-science piece of work. Why do you think it's important to encourage non-scientists to be part of the climate change conversation?

Interconnected thinking and being is a recognition that we need to bring everyone and every living thing together to find a way through and beyond the climate emergency, as well as mass extinction, environmental destruction, white supremacy, economic exploitation, misogyny, and gender oppression.

It is essential that art practice is in the 'conversation' because art can reside beyond definition. When people say, "this isn't art" or "is this art?" I always reply, "well what else is it?". Relational, socially engaged artists often feel they don't belong, we are forever finding ourselves in collaborations where we are the non-specialist. From a de-centered (humble, respectful, and caring) position we intentionally put another person at the centre so we can listen, watch, and ask questions; in this position we become useful as processors, connectors, and conduits.

Artists and art practice can change perspectives and enable and assist new imaginings. While specialists - scientists, engineers, lawyers, statisticians, and politicians etc - can get caught in the details specific to their field or to their goals, artists are good at squeezing in between the gaps or climbing up to get an overview.

Artists enjoy not knowing, we seek the borderlands, the liminal spaces of the unspeakable and unknowable. K. Melchor Quick Hall in her co-edited book *Mapping Gendered Ecologies* refers to the "Shoal" as a place beyond the shallow waters "where two or more cultures edge each other...in a constant state of transition" this fluid, dynamic



and moving space is where we need to be in the climate change conversation. Art cannot solve anything on its own, but in the company of other thinkers, makers, and doers in an “ecological space made of both water and not water”, artists can contribute to change.

Prior to ‘Soil Voices’ you have completed several crawling performances, including as a sheep wandering the Cambrian Mountains, and through the streets of Glasgow and the deserts of Egypt to United Nations climate conferences carrying a living tree on your back. Where will your work take you next?

My current work explores the interactions, ideas, and practices of multiple species, an exploration of the pluriverse, a world in which many worlds collide, and my attempt to experience and present post-anthropocentric



perspectives. I have been agitating the same hunches and probing the same propositions through different media and from multiple perspectives for many years. Each project is a proposition or series of propositions that I don’t know the answers to – I feel I’ve just got to keep moving into entangled worlds of uncertainty.

My current umbrella title *Co-becoming: multispecies mingling and the art of attentiveness* is so far encompassing 3 main projects: *When Earth Speaks*, *When Seeds Speak* and *When Stone Speaks*. All 3 projects begin with ‘dirty data’ or source or unprocessed data and the writing or drawing of that data; the performative element of each project will be explored through collaboration with musicians, dancers, voice artists, sound artists, composers, and filmmakers.