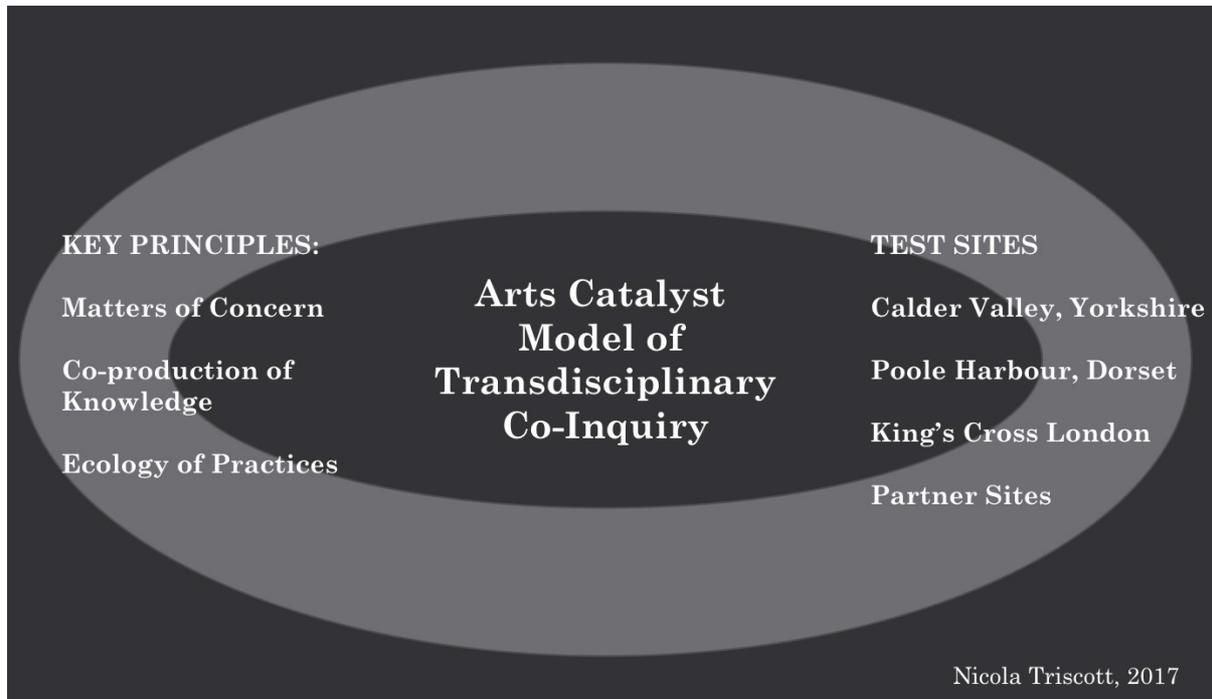


ARTS CATALYST'S CURATORIAL MODEL OF TRANSDISCIPLINARY CO-INQUIRY

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Some of the ideas in the text are taken from my PhD thesis: "Art and Intervention in the Stewardship of the Planetary Commons: Towards a Curatorial Model of Co-inquiry"



In an uncertain and changing world, the question of how we can effectively inquire into complex human and natural systems, and gain new knowledge and understanding, is urgent.

The major challenges facing us today intertwine environmental, social, political and psychological factors. Challenges such as flooding, species loss, air and water pollution, and plastics in the environment, and complex health issues like diabetes, mental illness and cancer, interweave large-scale global forces with the small-scale and the personal, and are inextricable from the social and political systems in which they unfold. We need to bring the tools of multiple disciplines to bear on understanding the underlying dynamics of these problems and issues, as well as finding solutions for them.

Critically, there is a need to involve those whose lives are directly affected – not just to make assumptions about causes and impacts – to create paths towards resistance and resilience. Today, we see the disenfranchisement of people from the governance and stewardship of the environments and systems within which they live.

When it comes to inquiries into such complex systems, empirical science on its own – whilst a powerful tool – not enough. In such inquiries, if we wish to consider the dynamic interactions of people with each other, with social, economic, political, and technological

systems, and with ecological and earth systems, we require methodologies that incorporate tools and approaches from different fields. Many scientists and thinkers are calling for multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches, involving disciplines beyond science, and for new ways of conducting science and research.

Dr Sylvia Nagl is an interdisciplinary complexity scientist who has contributed pioneering research to key questions in biomedicine (notably cancer research), the modelling of biological systems, and large-scale complex systems simulation. Her current work is situated within the emerging discipline of 'planetary health' and focuses on the interdependence of humans with urban and natural systems. She believes that there is an urgent need for new methodologies as we are faced with escalating health challenges situated in complex social-environmental systems on a rapidly changing planet.

The philosopher Mary Midgeley argues for pluralist thinking, an understanding that there are many independent forms and sources of knowledge, and that we cannot hope to understand our humanity without poetry or art, literature, music, philosophy, the humanities.

Bruno Latour has suggested a focus on 'matters of concern' rather than 'matters of fact'. Matters of fact, he argues, are only very partial and very polemical, very political renderings of matters of concern and only a subset of what could also be called states of affairs. Matters of fact then will emerge from a focus on matters of concern.

Over the last ten years of Arts Catalyst's work, I have been developing a curatorial model of critical and transdisciplinary co-inquiry (cooperative or collective inquiry), by which we can draw together the different skills and knowledge of people from different disciplines, including art, environmental and health science, social science, with people who are directly impacted by the 'matter of concern' or who live in the area of study, who then bring their own 'expertise-by-experience' into the inquiry.

This methodology draws on ideas of co-inquiry developed by John Heron and Peter Reason specifically in relation to the science of people (particularly health), although it diverges from their model in a number of ways. One of the most powerful ideas in Heron and Reason's co-inquiry model is the idea creating a research cycle between four types of knowledge, reflection and action: propositional knowing (of facts, concepts and ideas, as in modern science), experiential knowing (through direct encounter with a person, a place or a thing, that involves empathy, and is difficult to put into words), presentational knowing (which grows out of the experiential knowing and enables expression through, for example, storytelling, art or movement), and practical knowing (knowing in action: actually doing what you propose).

Heron and Reason criticise traditional science's methods in relation to the science of people for two main reasons: firstly, that there is often very little connection between the researcher's thinking and the concerns and experiences of the people who are actually involved, and secondly, that it tends to be a theoretical approach that doesn't help people find how to act to change things in their lives.

Over the past decade, projects that have been central to the early development of the ideas underlying our co-inquiry model have included Brandon Ballengée's *Malamp UK*, the *Arctic Perspective Initiative*, and *Wrecked on the Inter-tidal Zone*.

The key principles of this model include:

- centring the co-inquiry in a shared “matter of concern”.
- the intentional co-production of different types of knowledge – artistic, scientific and situated – that is context-specific, cooperative, and critical.
- being aware of and interested in how these different knowledges and practices relate to and affect one other: what Isabelle Stengers' calls an “ecology of practices”.

Some of the main characteristics of this model as Arts Catalyst carries it out include:

- A commitment to contemporary artists' practice. Art historical discourse informs and underpins it, but is not its central concern.
- Critical inter-/trans-disciplinarity. Bringing together of different kinds of knowledge and skill, to expand knowledge or address a challenge, with a critical contextual awareness of the social, political, cultural and ethical contexts.
- Experimental institutionalism. Valuing long term development over short term gains, and reflecting on the relationships between curators, artists, collaborators, art and audiences, and seeking to create meaning from activities.
- An experiential and performative understanding of art and exhibition. A focus on how to integrate art and knowledge into a lived or embedded experience for audiences and publics, being conscious of the relationship of curated experiences and opportunities for reflection to experiential learning, and understanding the work of art and of science as performative.

Arts Catalyst's transdisciplinary co-inquiry model is not a “to do” list, but rather a set of principles and approaches that we are using to shape our programme and projects.

One of our key programmes for testing the model is our series of *Test Sites*, through which we are engaging communities in different parts of the UK in responding to complex environmental issues at a local level – such as flooding, water quality, pollution, species loss, and climate change – and examining the interrelationships between health, wellbeing and environment. Key ideas are those of planetary health, building community resilience, stewardship and wellbeing, and environment and knowledge as commons. Through this, we hope to contribute to building new forms of community-based stewardship, research and knowledge.

In the co-inquiries, knowledge is produced of two broad types: **informative** and **transformative knowledge**. Informative knowledge includes localised propositional

knowledge and presentational knowledge (art, images, narrative and film). Transformative knowledge includes co-inquiry processes, practical knowledge, and experiential knowing.

We want to open a mutual learning and exchange space between *Test Sites* and other inquiry-based projects. We are planning to do this through a series of annual assemblies.