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Conversations With Rain: Proposing Poetic and Non-linear Interpretation Strategies in the Art Gallery

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Abstract

Conversations with Rain aims to disrupt conventional socio-constructivist and cognitive notions of the child familiar in museum settings by rethinking children's relations with art objects and weather worlds. Our rationale suggests that poetic and non-linear interpretation strategies, combined with artist studio practices that heighten presence and attention, expand the potential of more porous entanglements for children with the world, and potentially transform our climate futures. Disrupting didactic Gallery programming and environmental 'learning about' practices, we propose responsive, participatory, multisensory, open-ended, and poetic opportunities that recognise the unfixed, iterative, and tacit knowledges of the child. Building a body of research through a suite of five creative outputs *Conversations with Rain* contributes to more-than-human pedagogies that investigate how interdisciplinary, embodied, and practice-led approaches deepen engagement, lead to more responsive nature and culture relations, and enliven connection and empathy with children, art objects, and the world.

Prelude to Rain



Figure 1. Ngarralja Tommy May, *Raining on Kurtal*. 2016. Scratched enamel on tin, 120 x 120cm. State Art Collection, Art Gallery of Western Australia. Purchased 2017. ©Tommy May/Copyright Agency, 2021.

Raining on Kurtal is by Artist Ngarralja Tommy May—a Wangkajunga and Walmajarri man from Fitzroy Crossing, Western Australia. He dances and sings Kurtal, a ceremony relating to the main jila (living waterhole) in his country. *Raining on Kurtal* is one of the works in the State Art Collection at The Art Gallery of Western Australia, and the initial impetus for many of the creative outputs and responses by artists, researchers, and children alike in *Conversations with Rain*.

*The raindrops could actually be speaking to each other as they are falling,
But we don't know the language.
Child, age 6.*

Introduction

Conversations with Rain is an ongoing multi-platform, multi-disciplinary, multigenerational partnership between the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA) and Edith Cowan University (ECU) School of Education, Western Australia, employing artist-led practices and poetic pedagogies to heighten sensation and deepen empathic relations with materials, weather, and art objects. The project was initiated alongside a major public Exhibition at AGWA - *The Botanical: Beauty and Peril* (July 6 – Nov 4, 2019), resulting in multidisciplinary creative outputs and collaborations by researchers, artists, educators, children, and communities. Deliberately disrupting emphasis on cognitive learning in museums and galleries that conventionally deploy art objects as “educational tools” (MacRae et al., 2018, p. 505) we interrupt didactic learning ‘about’ climate crisis. We do this by considering the agency of art objects as having “the capacity to drive action and have unanticipated effects above and beyond what humans might envisage for them” (Hackett et al. 2020, p. 6). This non-didactic approach makes room for sensing, noticing, breathing, wondering, and collaborating with materials toward open-ended imaginative outcomes.

As a *collaboratory* (collaboration & laboratory) the pedagogical framework, documentation and interpretation strategies are drawn from responsive processes and emergent methodologies practiced by artist/educator and Head of Learning and Creativity Research at AGWA, Lilly Blue, and interdisciplinary artist and Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Dr. Jo Pollitt from ECU. Situated in the emerging fields of transdisciplinary climate change education (Cutter-McKenzie & Rousell, 2019), *Conversations with Rain* proposes alternate ways of engaging audiences in Gallery and Museum spaces and builds on the “hopeful, generous, generative, relational” common worlds research of Affrica Taylor, Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw and Mindy Blaise, (<https://commonworlds.net>), and Lilly Blue and Jo Pollitt’s ongoing collaboration through BIG Kids Magazine, disrupting hierarchies through studio

practice and poetic pedagogies (bigkidsmagazine.com).

Five Key Concepts

In this photo essay we share creative outputs developed with attention to the following five key concepts drawn from The Creativity Framework, Blue was instrumental in developing as part of the Sydney Opera House Creative Leadership in Learning program (Australia Council for the Arts, 2020). Following the work of geographer and co-designer with young people Jo Birch, *Conversations with Rain* employs a non-didactic model that allows artist educators to attend to the multiplicity of the child, their learnings/experiences, art objects, and the environment, rather than focusing solely on the child as a learner (Birch, 2018). Each of the creative outputs are accompanied by a photograph taken by the researchers together with a live link to audio, video, or PDF content, and were developed through engaging with the following speculative questions:

- 1. Presence/Attention:** What if everything begins with breathing?
- 2. Looking/Responding:** What if we allow more time to notice before responding?
- 3. Parameters/Limitation:** What if working within a framework makes us feel more free?
- 4. Emergence/Open-endedness:** What if we trust not knowing how things will turn out?
- 5. Reflection/Sharing:** What if listening is an artwork in itself?

Each question is unfixed and open-ended toward creating opportunities for dynamic, improvised poetic, and non-linear responses. The questions are utilised for developing response scores, studio workshops, multi-generational public programming, and creative learning resources. A video exploring the 5 concepts can be found here <https://vimeo.com/370249527>

Five Creative Outputs

1. Sound of Rain



Figure 2. Lin Onus *Bushfire* 1987 synthetic polymer on cotton duck 91 x 111.5 cm. Janet Holmes à Court Collection © Lin Onus/Copyright Agency, 2021.

Conor O'Brien *Bushfire* 2004 digital print 66.3 x 96.8cm (image), 71.5 x 102.0 (sheet) State Art Collection, Art Gallery of Western Australia. Purchased through the Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation: TomorrowFund, 2009.

<https://soundcloud.com/artgallerywa/conversationwithrainsoundloop>

A child stands barefoot underneath a directional speaker feeling the sounds of child-made rain fall as she listens with her whole body. As sound falls there is an opportunity for reflection and expanded sensorial experience.

Situated in the fire section of a major public exhibition drawn from works in the AGWA State Art Collection and Janet Holmes à Court Gallery *The Botanical: Beauty and Peril*, the Sound of Rain evokes imaginings of drought, fire and downpour through tissue paper crumpling and the repetitions of graphite marking pages. Sounds were created and recorded in an art studio where materials and children led processes of experimentation, and artists responded, resulting in a child-material-artist collaboration. Emerging from open-ended and generative creative responses to rain, ‘Sound of Rain’ was recorded during *Conversations with Rain* workshops facilitated by Blue in the AGWA Learning studio with children aged from 3 to 11. The sound was created through impromptu and dynamic embodied responses with materials; crunching, ripping, and shaking of tissue paper; tapping and scratching with graphite pencils, and clapping hands. ‘Sound of Rain’ proposes how listening to child-made weather engages a deep sense of being *with* rain, and how these ways of experiencing and being might lead to more responsive nature and culture relations, and empathic entanglements with climate crisis.

2. Library of Rain



Figures 3, 4, & 5. Sound of Rain books can be ‘played’ creating resonances of drizzle, shower, downpour, or deluge depending on how the pages are turned.

<https://soundcloud.com/artgallerywa/conversations-with-rain>

By harnessing artist-led studio practices conventional book-making was challenged, and children were invited to engage with curated materials to construct multi-sensory artist/rain books. The Rain Books were made while listening to the sounds of rainstorms with pages torn and stapled illustrating the implications of compositional choices. In 2019, over 600 Rain Books created by multigenerational public audiences accumulated in the Imagination Room at the Art Gallery of Western Australia to form an open access Library of Rain.

3. Poetic Rain

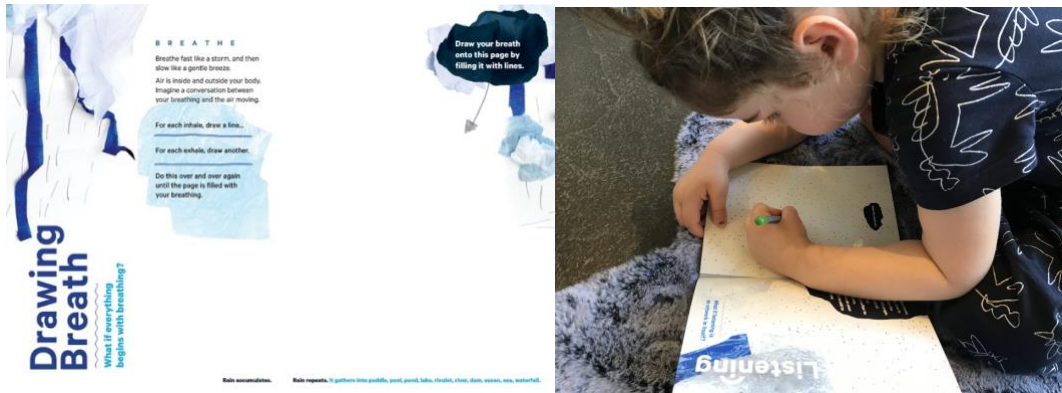


Figure 6. Poetic Rain.

“stripy rain furious rain light rain horror rain dark rain wavy rain dragon head rain shaky rain blue rain metallic rain flippy rain windy rain scratchy rain crunchy rain punchy rain pretty rain hidden rain safe rain criminal rain tree rain fireworks rain first rain circle rain plus rain puddle rain surprise rain...”

Aware of the limitations of scientific, environmental, and linear descriptions of rain, child-generated poetic responses of remembered experiences with rain were collected by artists and researchers. A myriad of poetic rain/s illustrate the scope of imaginative practices by offering new ways of thinking/being/noticing with rain. Expanding on the limited language of ‘rain/hail/shine’ existing in standard weather readings, and instructive learning ‘about’ precipitation, condensation and evaporation, a more nuanced poetic vocabulary was developed. We are currently exploring the capacity building potential of poetic language to converse with weather through a project called ‘Rainwriting.’

4. The Response Journal



Figures 8 & 9. Response Journal.

<https://artgallery.wa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-04/Conversations With Rain For Families.pdf>

Rain can walk on the ground and swim in the river

Child age 4.

The Response Journal offers open-ended portals for engaging with art works through the lens of weather. Inviting audiences to respond sensorially through a series of scaffolded scores, the pages accumulate with marks that illustrate conversations with environments, art objects, and each other. Rather than an 'Exhibition Trail' leading audiences on a predetermined journey through the Gallery with preconceived didactics, the journal invites children to map their own experience following beyond curiosity and creatively responding to many different works of art through the lens of weather.

5. *Kep Waangkiny (Water Talking)*



Figure 10. Lin Onus *Bushfire* 1987 synthetic polymer on cotton duck 91 x 111.5 cm Janet Holmes à Court Collection © Lin Onus/Copyright Agency, 2021

<https://vimeo.com/371526014>

Two dancers underneath falling sounds of child-made rain respond to the Gooloogoolup swamp waterways that resonate beneath the foundations of AGWA's Brutalist architecture.

Kep waangkiny (water talking), is a dance film that is an example of both *artwork as research data* and *artwork as a resource* in itself. For the making of this dance film, choreographer Jo Pollitt and Noongar poet and performer Maitland Schnaars responded to the sound of child-made rain and the concept of unseen waterways that permeate human and non-human bodies. The dancers draw upon a logic that privileges experiential attention where human and non-human bodies of weather are in perpetual movement. The rain, in this case, is a recording of children making sounds of rain with tissue paper and pencils. In these moments there is no separation between body and environment. Instead, connection and care for atmospheric conditions and a changing climate is prioritised and creatively cultivated.

A Concluding Invitation

The embodied practices outlined in the 5 creative outputs shared in this photo essay serve to heighten sensation and attention beyond didactic learning ‘about’ art objects and climate crisis. By demonstrating the potential of more-than-human poetic pedagogies through the outlined suite of artist-led projects it is proposed that interdisciplinary, embodied, and practice-led approaches can deepen engagement, lead to more responsive environmental relations, and enliven connection and empathy with children, art objects, and the world.

Readers are invited to continue responding, experimenting, and listening with rain:

With a partner take turns using two pencils, one in each hand, to make the sound of rain on a page. Listen to the sound of mark-making. Press harder and softer to change the volume of the downpour. . .

What if listening is an artwork in itself?

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About the Authors

Lilly Blue is an interdisciplinary artist, educator and researcher with a background in poetic pedagogies, classroom-based studio practice and community development. She currently works as Head of Learning and Creativity Research at the Art Gallery of Western Australia collaborating on projects that amplify the experience of children and other marginalised groups as critical and valuable in activating ethical futures. As Teaching Artist and Creativity Consultant for Sydney Opera House she was instrumental in the development of the *Creative Leadership in Learning* program and *The Creativity Framework*. She is Co- director of contemporary arts publication BIG Kids Magazine.

Jo Pollitt is an interdisciplinary artist and Forrest Fellow at Edith Cowan University in the School of Education and the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts. Her research is grounded in a twenty-year practice of working with improvisation as methodology across multiple performed, choreographic and publishing platforms. Jo is co-founder of the feminist

research collective The Ediths, artist-researcher with #FEAS -Feminist Educators Against Sexism, and core member of ECU's Centre for People Place & Planet. She is Co- director of BIG Kids Magazine and author of *The dancer in your hands* < >.

Mindy Blaise is a Vice Chancellor's Research Fellow, in the School of Education, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia. She is also Co-director of the Centre for People, Place & Planet and Co-founder of the Common Worlds Research Collective. Her transdisciplinary and post developmental research with the more-than-human uses responsive, affect-focused and creative methods to rework a humanist ontology. She is interested in how the more-than-human and feminist speculative research practices activate new meanings about childhood that sit outside the narrow confines of developmentalism.

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