Nature Through Art

Art Education for Ecological Awareness

Fondation Beyeler
Gerðarsafn – Kópavogur Art Museum
The Nature Museum of Kópavogur
Louisiana Museum of Modern Art
Moderna Museet Malmö
Moderna Museet, Stockholm
Museum Sinclair-Haus

Six museums in five different countries, each exploring the relationship between art and nature in art education, met annually over a period of five years for a collegial professional exchange. This publication brings together their experiences and reflections. The collaboration will continue with future meetings.

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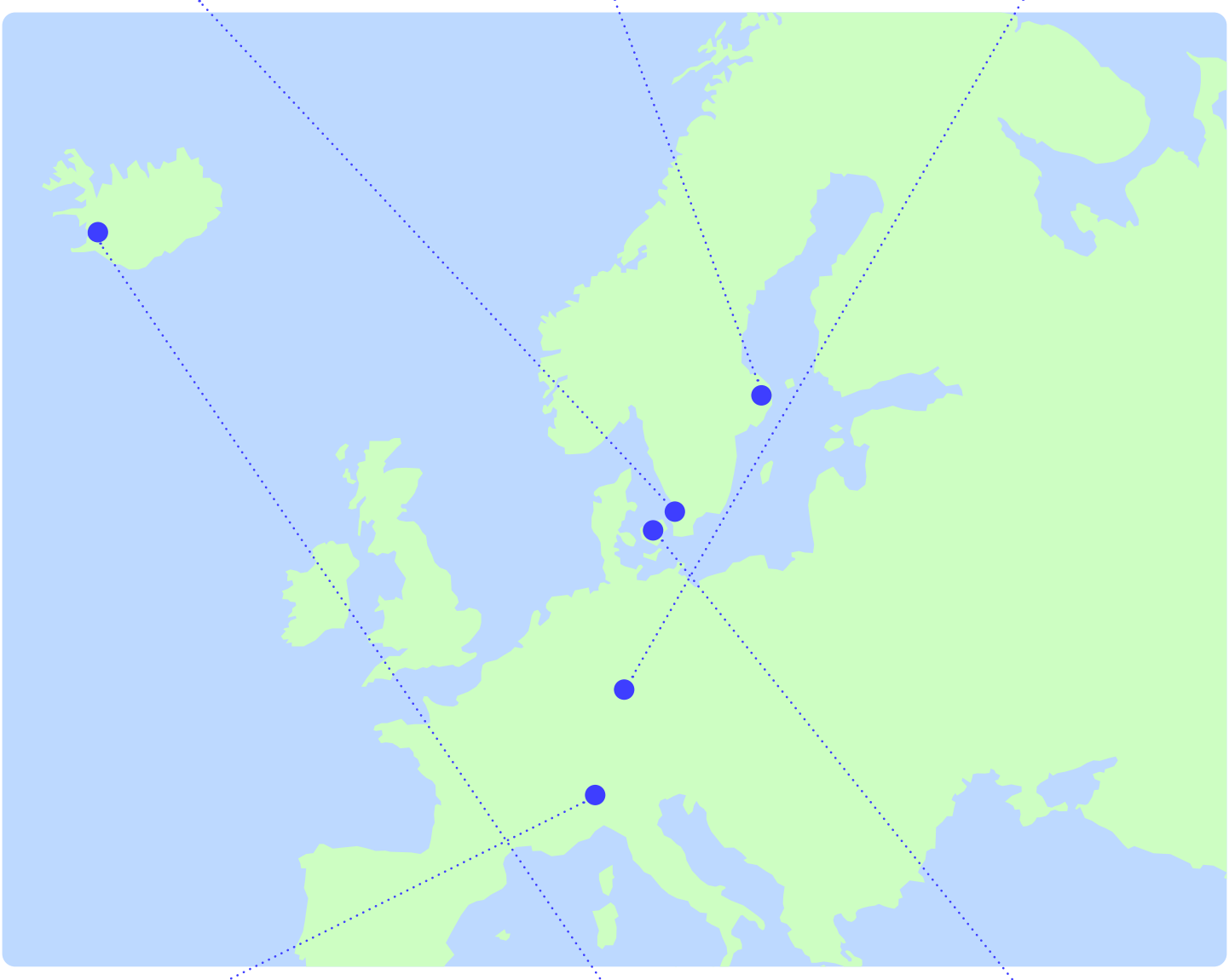
Art Education for Ecological Awareness

Moderna Museet Malmö
Malmö, Sweden

Moderna Museet
Stockholm, Sweden

Museum Sinclair-Haus
Bad Homburg vor der Höhe, Germany



Fondation Beyeler
Riehen, Switzerland

Gerðarsafn Art Museum &
the Nature Museum of Kópavogur
Kópavogur, Iceland

Louisiana Museum
Humlebæk, Denmark

This is why we do it…

‘Nature through Art’ network

Growing through art and nature

Aspirations to develop an art education for ecological awareness trigger many questions: What happens when you explore nature through art? Can the attentive, sensory, even immersive and poetic qualities of art help us connect with nature and build meaning and value into? How are we as art educators able to create meaningful learning experiences fostering agency and hope in times of ecosystem collapse and other matters connected to climate change? How might artistic practices help us reimagine or challenge the cultural narratives we hold about nature, urban development and our shared future? What ways are there to adopt a more-than-human perspectives in our educational work to foreground multispecies perspectives and system dynamics?

These questions are crucial for the educational work at five different art museums; Gerðarsafn in collaboration with the Nature Museum of Kópavogur (IS), Fondation Beyeler (CH), Museum Sinclair-Haus (DE), Moderna Museet (SE) and Louisiana Museum of Modern Art (DK). Across these institutions, there is a strong commitment to find ways for art museums to contribute to a sustainable future beyond dealing with questions of carbon footprint, waste and use of energy, but by seeking deeper connections with nature through art and thus encouraging a stronger sense of curiosity and care for nature.

A dialogue across these five institutions has been growing over the last five years to discuss and exchange ideas, theory and best practice. The dialogue and network for peer-to-peer learning were established with a conference in June 2022 where these art institutions as well as Wanås (SE) were invited to Louisiana to present their work to a wider audience of practioners. ‘Nature through Art’ was the name of the conference with reference to a new learning programme at Louisiana for children age 4–10 from kindergardens and schools developed two years earlier.

Since 2022 each of the institutions has in turn hosted an annual conference combined with workshops and field studies: Louisiana Art Museum, 2022, Moderna Museet 2023, Gerdasafn 2024, Fondation Beyeler 2025 and Museum Sinclair-Haus 2026. Over the years, a large number of artists and researchers have been invited to join the

conversation and share their knowledge and feedback: Lene Lange (professor and mycologist), Rune Bosse (artist), Nicolaj Schultz (Ph.d. philosophy and sociology, ass. Professor, Aarhus School of Architecture), Caroline Mårtensson (artist), Kata Nylén (climate psychologist), Ole Sandberg (Ph.d. philosophy, University of Iceland), Heiðar Kári Rannversson (writer and independent curator), Þorgerður Ólafsdóttir (artist), Gunndís Ýr Finnbogadóttir (artist and ass. professor at Iceland University of Arts), Rúri (artist), Sigríður Sunna Reynisdóttir (founder and artistic director at ÞYKJÓ), Yvonne Volkart (art theorist, head of research at the Institute Art Gender Nature, Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW), Jan Torpus (design and art researcher, lecturer at Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW), Estelle Zhong-Mengual (Ph.d. art history and political science, lecturer at Beaux-Arts de Paris and Sciences Po Paris), Nicola Lepp (professor for culture and mediation, University of Applied Sciences, Potsdam) , Karin Bergdolt (artist and art educator), Anno Bolender (dance artist and educator), Astrid Lembcke-Thiel (curator and artistic researcher), Sina Ribak (researcher in ecology and art).

The ambition behind this e-book is to share some of the ideas and discoveries that each institution has brought to the table along with discussions and key findings made thanks to the network and these conferences from 2022–2026.

We deeply value this network of colleagues because it brings together people who are engaging with greater nature connection and changing landscapes in different parts of the world—through art education in museums. Whether it is rising sea levels in Scandinavia, landslides in Switzerland, drought-stressed forests in Germany, or melting glaciers in Iceland—these are different expressions of the same profound transformation.

They remind us that we are all connected. Across countries and disciplines, we share similar questions and challenges: how to understand these changes, how to respond to them, and how to care for the environments we live in. For us, this exchange is essential. It allows us to learn from one another's experiences and perspectives, and to recognize that while our landscapes may differ, our concerns—and our responsibilities—are shared.

We want to think with and learn from colleagues in the network on how art collections and artistic methods can be a resource in strengthening our relationship with nature, raising questions on the ecological crisis and finding more sustainable ways to work.

This e-book brings together these experiences and seeks to inspire individuals and institutions to engage with the living world through art and art mediation—not as motif, material, or environment, but as a community of living beings with whom we can build relationships. It introduces the participating institutions while also serving as an invitation to experiment and to think further.

In her essay written for this publication, art historian Estelle Zhong Mengual reflects on how art and art museums might transform the ways we perceive and relate to the living world today, and what new forms of thought are needed for this potential to unfold. We extend our sincere thanks for this generous and inspiring contribution.

Our heartfelt thanks also go to our colleagues across education, curatorial, and organizational fields, as well as to the museum directors, whose collaboration, openness, and continued support have sustained this network and made this shared process of learning possible.

This e-book addresses you as a co-thinker and co-creator, in the hope that the approaches gathered here will open up resonant spaces that you can take up, question, and develop further within your own contexts.

Invitations to connect with the living world

Compiled by the network members

Arriving

- Lie down in the grass and look up at the sky. Feel the wind, notice the sounds and scents, and breathe slowly and deeply.
- Walk barefoot through the grass.
- Take a walk in the dark or at twilight. Notice how your sensations change as light fades.
- Sit or stand quietly in one place. What do you see, hear, smell, and feel?
- Listen closely to birdsong. Try to remember the sound deep within you.
- Listen to water—a stream, river, or spring. What does it seem to say?
- Sleep outside under the open sky and watch the sunrise.

Connecting

- Pay attention to how different degrees of order and wildness shape how a place feels. What do you notice?
- Notice biodiversity: how many different plants, animals, and fungi can you find?
- Examine the soil: is it bare or covered? What might that indicate?
- Notice recurring patterns in how plants, fungi, and lichens take shape and spread in their surroundings.
- What is the smallest organism you can perceive? The largest?
- Notice the relationships between living beings here: where do you see cooperation, competition, or dependence?
- Imagine this place without vegetation.

Exchanging

- Meet a friend outdoors to draw, write, or simply observe together.
- Let yourself be guided blindfolded by another person through a natural environment. Notice trust and sensory perception.
- Start a shared photography practice where everyone contributes one outdoor image on a regular basis.
- Talk with others about climate change, loss, and transformation—and notice what brings you courage.

Observing

- Draw a tree: first the visible form above ground, then imagine and draw its roots below.
- Look closely at tree bark. First with closed eyes, then with open eyes, or even a magnifying glass.
- Observe the clouds each day—through photography, drawing, or painting. Watch how clouds move. Can you trace their motion through drawing?
- Examine the soil: what balance of organic and mineral matter might lie beneath your feet?
- Lie on your stomach and observe the ground at eye level. Notice insects, textures, and the tiniest movements.
- Count and name the plants you encounter on your way.
- In the city, look for plants growing in cracks and along walls.

Invitations to connect with the living world

Compiled by the network members

Shifting

- Observe landscapes such as coastlines or mountains. What signs of change can you detect?
- Notice organic and inorganic materials around you.
- What connections do you see between human activity and environmental conditions?
- How might this place look in the future?

Relating

- Write a love letter or poem to a tree, a stone, an animal, or another being.
- Reflect on the plants you eat. What do you feel—gratitude, habit, connection?
- What kinds of exchanges are you part of with the natural world—giving, receiving, transforming?
- How are you shaping your future? What cycles are you part of?
- In what ways are you part of nature?
- How do you feel standing beneath a tree?
- Create a small altar at home with natural objects you find and love, changing it with the seasons.

Imagining

- Imagine being a tree: rooted in the ground, swaying in the wind, in constant exchange with fungi, insects, and the soil beneath you.
- Take on the perspective of a plant or an animal for a day: what do you need to grow, move, and rest?
- Imagine being a butterfly, a beetle or a bee. What does it feel like to experience the world through antennae?
- Imagine the world suddenly slowing down around you—what changes?
- What can you perceive more clearly with your eyes closed?
- What does a sunbeam taste like?
- What do the first spring flowers sound like?
- Imagine all the birds around you as companions in your life—how does that feel?

Approaching

- Create an algae portrait: collect small pieces of algae, arrange them on wet watercolor paper, and let them dry.
- Draw outdoors—alone or with others. You can take turns adding lines to a shared drawing.
- Draw using a branch as an extension of your arm. Attach charcoal or crayon to its tip.
- Draw the shadow of a tree or trace its branching structure onto paper.
- Capture movement—of wind, clouds, birds, or falling leaves—through drawing, even without looking at the paper.
- Try drawing with your feet.

Estelle Zhong Mengual

Why go to a museum when I could go to the forest?

Essay

Why go to a museum when I could go to the forest? I am regularly asked this question at conferences. How can a museum—an enclosed space built by human hands, where only human artefacts are displayed—play any role in nurturing our interest in and attention to the living world? In other words: do art and museums possess powers of their own when it comes to connecting us with living beings? And if so, what are they?

Mourning the loss of a "natural" relationship with nature

The first resistance to the relevance of museums stems from a widely shared collective imaginary about what the proper way of relating to nature should be: relating to nature should be... natural. This may sound like a truism, but it conceals deep-seated assumptions about what we mean by nature and what we expect from our relationship with it—assumptions that museums, at first sight, do not seem able to fulfil. Many of us aspire to encounter nature in terms of authenticity, immediacy and spontaneity. A genuine relationship with nature would be a direct one, free of mediation or intermediaries. It would be immersive and sensory, activated through pure presence: a place where artifice is no longer necessary, where everything appears in a state of pure transparency and self-evidence—no more need for words, concepts, discourse or tools. We dream of a natural relationship with nature, and the fact that many of us rarely experience such a relationship only reinforces this ideal.

This ideal reveals the way Western culture has long opposed nature and society. In the social world, we must constantly make efforts to live together; our relationships are mediated by technologies and institutions; we rely on speech and writing to interact with other human beings. In contrast, we dream of a place where none of this would apply—a place where we could finally be free from what we often experience as constraints. A place outside the social world: nature. Yet this Western conception tells us more about our dissatisfaction with the way our societies function than it does about the living world itself or about the appropriate ways of relating to it. Above all, it risks erasing something fundamental: the living world is made of alterity. Just as entering into relationships with these alterities that are other human beings requires time, effort and tools in order to understand and love them, so too does entering into relationships with the other-than-human world.

The ideal of a purely "natural" relationship with nature constantly runs the risk of encountering only ourselves everywhere: without intermediaries—tools, translations and forms of knowledge, we might always be tempted to project on a living being or a landscape what it evokes in us instead of inquiring about its way of living, its singularities, its

particular history. This autumnal forest might for example stir feelings of melancholy but it tells us nothing about the active decisions being made at this very moment by the trees, how they are slowly retrieving sugars from every leaf to prepare for the spring ahead. And so we miss the trees' agency and see them only as a reflection of our own state of mind.[1]

Going to a museum in order to sustain a relationship with the living world means accepting this need for intermediaries which are essential in order to do justice to the living world not as a fantasy, but as an alterity. We lose in naturalness, perhaps, but we gain in otherness.

The museum as a place to encounter relationships between humans and the living world

The deep and rich relationships with nature that appear effortless and immediate to us, the kind we might observe, for example, in some farmers, naturalists or Indigenous peoples for example, are not natural or innate. It is because their bodies carry the traces of knowledge, experiences and tools that have been passed down by others before them: parents, mentors, elders. It's because these mediations accumulate over time until they become like a "second nature" and thus largely invisible.

And what is a museum if not a gathering of elders, grandparents and mentors? Within its walls are preserved the experiences, visions and encounters that humans before us had with the living world. Works of art are the translations of what they perceived, felt, understood or wanted to express about nature. Some artists often had an advantage over us as visitors: they spent time with nature, sometimes a lifetime. They sometimes observed it with curiosity and attention, and thus, they sometimes convey aspects of the living world that we might not have perceived without them.

The museum can be a place where we encounter the meaningful relationships that some humans have forged with nature. Some artists formed strong, complex and enduring connections with living beings throughout their lives. Exhibiting works that bear witness to these relationships, but also making this dimension of artistic life visible in exhibitions and collections, can therefore make a real difference. This struck me particularly during my visit to the Georgia O'Keeffe exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2021. The exhibition began with a biographical section. Her relationship with Alfred Stieglitz was given considerable attention there. Numerous photographic portraits of her, as well as photos of Ghost Ranch, her home in Abiquiu, New Mexico, were projected or displayed. But little or nothing was said about her many forms of engagement with the living world, even though landscapes, flowers, skies and animal skeletons make up a huge, indeed dominant, part of her work. Nothing about the farm where she was born and her attachment to the countryside. Nothing about her devoted gardening. Nothing about

1 On how to distinguish between projecting and encountering alterity, see the concept of resonance in Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance. A sociology of our relationship to the world* (2019), London, Polity Books, 2021.

her daily walks in the mountains around Ghost Ranch for years and years. Nothing was said about any of this, probably because relationships with nature are culturally regarded as minor, incidental, since nature itself is seen as a secondary aspect of human existence. These aspects would only be mentioned if the exhibition explicitly focused on Georgia O'Keeffe's relationship with nature. Otherwise, the focus remains on those aspects of her life that more readily fit the archetype of the charismatic modern artist: life in New York, her role as a muse, her beauty, her style, love and solitude. Highlighting the relationships artists have woven with the living world, integrating them as an intrinsic part of their existence—even when these are not the absolute and sole centre of their lives—is a way of highlighting the value that the living world can bring to a human life.

Artists have historically been recognised in Western societies, particularly since the avant-garde, as bearers of values to which society aspires: emancipation from social norms, for example, or the demand for new forms of freedom. Making visible the relationships artists have cultivated with nature is therefore a way of introducing lives that made room for the living world into the collective imagination of what a human life might be.

The museum as a place to ask oneself: what kind of world do I want to live in?

But of course, not all works of art depicting nature reflect an interest in the richness and complexity of the living world. This is one of the current challenges facing museums as they embrace an ecological shift: moving beyond nature as a single artistic theme to highlight the diversity of relationships that humans have with the living world. Some works embody relationships of domination, hierarchy or exploitation toward nature. This takes many forms, some more explicit than others: sometimes, an artwork treats the living world as a passive and secondary backdrop to human action, as was often the case in landscape painting up to the Romantic period; at other times, it features an animal or plant merely as a metaphor or human symbol, with no curiosity about the life form itself; at other times, it perpetuates toxic prejudices about certain living beings and their supposed inferiority to the human species, as is the case in many still lifes where monkeys, dogs and cats merely embody greed, deceit and gluttony. The list could go on. How, then, should one navigate this disparity of values associated with representations of nature? Does this mean we should stop exhibiting works that embody a relationship with the living world that distances us from recognising its importance and complexity? Should we explicitly point out, in exhibition labels, the toxic conceptions of the living world that underlie the artworks?

In my view, an interesting solution lies in creating exhibition displays based on the juxtaposition of works that are antagonistic to one another: the aim is for the visitor to be able to compare for themselves

the relationships to the living world embodied by the works, and to decide for themselves what they value. Rather than stating it, it becomes a matter of showing it. Rather than writing in a label that these paintings convey a problematic and mistaken view of non-human animals, it seems to me that placing them side by side with works that do justice to the richness of animal life allows the visitor to experience—emotionally and sensually, and therefore in a way that is more likely to leave a more lasting impression—the version of the world in which they choose to live. Rather than criticising, at the risk of undermining the visitor's autonomy from the outset, the aim is to compare and confront. To highlight, in the very way the works are displayed, not only variety but opposition—the struggle between competing visions of what the human being is and of their relationship with the living world—a confrontation that continues to this day in our contemporary societies. Rather than giving visibility only to what we might consider the 'right relationship', room could be made for conflict and the visitor could be left to decide which world seems to them more worthy of being inhabited, of being loved.

More generally, it seems important to me not to be too quick to judge whether a work is capable of provoking a meaningful encounter with the living world, whether it is of interest: in my view, one never knows what might make a difference to a visitor. A landscape painting which, in the eyes of an eco-critical art historian, is not especially interesting in terms of the relationship to the living world it conveys, nevertheless always retains the latent power to resonate with something within the visitor and to bring about a lasting transformation of perception. We cannot anticipate what will be seen and felt.

The very nature of a work of art is to be profoundly multifaceted in its effects and in the interpretations that can be made of it. A work of art is not a hammer that can be used to nail down an idea, a message or a vision[2]. To my mind, a display is not a demonstration: the works are not cogs in an implacable mechanism designed to produce conviction, but impressionistic brushstrokes that construct subtle lines of tension. Artworks always say more and something other than the concept of an exhibition: the aim is to create a curatorial space that does not prevent them from unfolding the plurality, and sometimes the ambiguity, of their effects.

2 On the limits of using art to convey a political message, see Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (2008), London, Verso, 2009.

The museum as a place to encounter embodied, sensible knowledge

Certain works, however, can act as intermediaries towards a deeper connection with the living world, particularly by enabling us to encounter its hidden dimensions. Encountering the living world through works of art can even give us access to hidden dimensions of the living world. It is true that we are not in co-presence: most of the time, living beings are not there "in the flesh". But mediation through art does something else: it can give us access to dimensions that lie outside the field of our attention when we walk through a forest. We lose in naturalness, but we gain perhaps in acuity.

Consider, for example, a painting of a birch tree such as *De zich spiegelende berk* (1857–1870) by Johannes Warnardus Bilders. Because this birch tree was seen through a human eye and translated by it, it both resembles itself and does not resemble itself. It is indeed the same tree, yet transformed, entirely charged with the painter's attention. Its body on the canvas is dotted with clues to what struck the artist. In this sense, a work of art is a selection of accents. There were a thousand ways to see and represent this birch tree, but what the painter perceived was its special relationship with light. The birch is a remarkable tree that often thrives when an opening suddenly appears in the forest canopy—after a storm or the felling of trees. In that brief moment, before the canopy closes again, the birch flourishes before eventually giving way to species who love shade. It is this relationship—among other characteristics—that Bilders captured. His pictorial choices and compositional structure, built around contrasts between light and shadow, orient the viewer's attention toward this otherwise invisible relationship between birch and sun. The visitor is thus more likely to notice and feel the importance of this relationship than if they encountered the tree by chance along a forest path.

The work of art constructs a system of accents that can reveal to our human eyes the otherwise invisible qualities and relationships of the living world. From this perspective, the work contains knowledge about the living world—it knows things and shares them with us. This is a particular kind of knowledge: embodied knowledge, or sensible knowledge, in which understanding a being cannot be separated from form, because it is precisely through form that this knowledge becomes possible.

That is precisely the difference between coming across the statement "the birch is a light-demanding species" on Wikipedia and seeing Bilders' painting. The information on Wikipedia is separable from its form: I can extract it from its Wikipedia page without changing the content of the information. If I had come across this information in a biology textbook rather than online, it would not have changed its content either. Here we are dealing with *detachable* knowledge: this is true of most Western scientific knowledge. But in the case of Bilders' work, it is the painting as a whole—its composition, the pictorial treatment, the contrast and brilliance of the colours—that makes me feel and understand that the birch

has a unique relationship with light, that it thrives there, where others do not. It would be wrong to say that, when faced with this work, I extract knowledge as one withdraws money from a bank: I do not leave Bilder's painting with the information 'the birch is a light-demanding species" stored in my mind. I leave with the sensory experience of a relationship between the birch and the sun, which will remain in my memory intertwined with the various pictorial elements on the canvas, because it is they that have shaped this experience. Sensible knowledge—that is, knowledge that cannot be separated from the form in which it was born—is later drawn upon in a different way within the fabric of everyday life than detachable knowledge is.

Sensible knowledge will never lead me to say to a friend, 'Hey, did you know that the birch is a light-demanding species?', as reading a Wikipedia article might. But one day, I might be walking outside and see a tree with that familiar whiteness, standing on that very edge between shadow and light, just as in Bilders' painting: and then I would smile and I would know. I would know that this tree is a birch. Such is the strange mode of existence of sensible knowledge.

The museum as a place of attention to non-human meaning

Another advantage of encountering nature in works of art stems from the habits visitors bring with them to the museum. Standing before a work of art, visitors often assume—sometimes unconsciously—that there is something to understand. This expectation partly comes from the influence Italian Renaissance on the history of Western art, which produced highly discursive works that require interpretation. But it may also arise more simply from the fact that a work of art is an object made by a human being, and we therefore assume it must contain meaning.

But when we encounter beings not created by human hands—plants or animals—we often do not ask questions about their meaning. It is as if they had none, as if humans were the only beings capable of creating meaning. The birch tree does not trigger interpretation. It is simply what it is: nature. Yet this attitude reflects a cultural inheritance that fails to see living beings as having agency —both within their individual lives and within the long lineages to which they belong. We fail to see them as perspectives on the world : as the protagonists and centers of their own lives just as much as we are of ours, as centres that shape the physical environment around them into a lived environment. As centres that configure their surroundings into a meaningful living space, generating and conveying its own interpretations.

We do not ask what their way of being might mean for themselves and for others: what life story is told by the silhouette of these branches? Does the whiteness of birch bark reveal something about its way of life? Is it an invention of its lineage to solve a problem? What does the birch tree mean

to the blueberries that often grow at its feet? And to the hare? Encountering a birch tree within a work of art creates the possibility that the interpretive attitude triggered by the artwork *spills over into* what it depicts. It invites us to approach the living world with a different kind of attention—one that makes room for meaning. What should I see? What should I grasp? What is happening here? Such an attitude can act as an antidote to a deeply destructive habit: failing to see living beings as creators of meaning in their own worlds, and therefore being quick to destroy them and their world, because we do not see precisely what has meaning and value for them.

The museum as homecoming

Another key challenge in deepening our relationship with the living world is to be able to experience a sense of belonging: to see and understand ourselves anew, not simply as human beings, but as living beings among other living beings: as human animals sharing a common history with the rest of the animals, plants, fungi and bacteria. But how can we foster this experience in the museum? Is it enough simply to say it, to write it down? But how can we ensure that this sense of belonging has a chance of being felt, rather than merely absorbed as information, experienced as something external, and thus not recalled within the experience of the exhibition itself? I feel it's one of the main challenges in the museum, and elsewhere, when it comes to the ecological turn: fostering an ecological eye requires a great deal of knowledge. The question becomes: how to invent ways both in curation and museum education of conveying knowledge that don't feel like information, if that makes sense, but like sensible, embodied, emotionally-loaded material that can play a full part in the exhibition experience itself??

There is, of course, no single answer to this question; the aim is above all to open up this field of reflection, but I would like to suggest a possible approach here, inspired by the protocols proposed by the Fluxus artists of the 1960s. Take, for example, Yoko Ono's book *Grapefruit* (1964). The book contains a series of instructions. Some can be performed in a practical sense:

CITY PIECE

Walk all over the city with an empty baby carriage.

1961 winter

But most can only be performed internally:

TUNAFISH SANDWICH PIECE

Imagine one thousand suns in the
sky at the same time.
Let them shine for one hour.
Then, let them gradually melt
into the sky.
Make one tuna sandwich and eat.

1964 spring [3]

The great strength of this work lies in its reliance on the power of language to prompt action: whether it be a visible external action or an invisible internal one, each text, partly because it takes the form of instructions, engages the reader whether they want it or not. They read it and suddenly, almost despite themselves, find themselves imagining it—that is to say, performing it. In other words, reading the text becomes the experience of an action. The aim, of course, of these exercises is to transform the reader's quality of attention and inner dispositions. Yet it is precisely this kind of lever, in my view, that a museum can activate so that mediation tools take the form not only of information, but of actions performed by visitors[4]. Enriching our relationships to the living world require often to mobilize additional knowledge alongside the artworks themselves. So to my mind, one of the greatest challenges is to think of how we can convey this knowledge

In the case of the issue at hand, the instructions essentially concern remembrance, since it is a matter of recalling this history shared with the living—a history we may not always be aware of, yet which is deeply embedded in our bodies and ways of being. The challenge is this: would carrying out an internal exercise beforehand or along the way —one that rekindles within us our condition as living beings—make us pay attention to the works differently? Visiting an exhibition about the sea—an exhibition of photographs or paintings, for example—would be experienced very differently if a remembrance protocol were introduced at some point: Can you remember? The sea is the place where we were born. We lived there for millions of years before exiling ourselves to dry land[5]. Would looking at an exhibition of wildlife paintings, after having gone through an inner exercise that reminds us of our shared animal history, make it feel like an exhibition of family portraits?

It should be noted that this type of protocol can also be used, not only to rekindle our memory of being living beings, but also to attempt to approach the way of being of someone other than ourselves. This is what is used, for example, in the postwar Japanese dance, called butoh:

3 Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit* (1964), New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000.
4 On the power of instructions, see Anna Dezeuze, "Do-It-Yourself Artworks : A User's Guide" in Jonathan Harris (ed.), *Dead History, Live Art? Spectacle, subjectivity and Subversion in Visual Culture since the 1960's*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press + Tate Liverpool, 2007.
5 See the exercise of remembrance created by Joanna Macy: Joanna Macy, Molly Young Brown, *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives* (1998), Gabriola Island, New Society, 2014.

Your fingers are pinching small flower petals.
The petals have a smooth, velvety touch.
They are very thin and fragile.
Your body becomes a flower.
When you express a flower, it is based on its scent,
the pollen and its entire atmosphere.
You lean forwards by drawing concentric circles
which are the shape of the petals.
Other petals on your hips and right thigh curl up.
Still another petal curls up on your left thigh.
As a result, your knees shake a little.
Thus your body has now become a flower.
The flower opens slowly.[6]

Would the visitor have a different experience of an exhibition on Georgia O'Keeffe's flowers after having undergone an internal exercise of this kind?

More generally, I believe it is a matter of imagining curatorial approaches that aim to subtly shift and reframe, through a sensory experience, the persona and the representation of oneself and other living beings with which a visitor enters the museum. In such a way that they might perhaps feel other identities, other connections, other affiliations between themselves and the rest of the living world.

The museum as a place to repopulate our inner world

Because a work of art offers forms saturated with attention and meaning, it has the power to penetrate our imaginations and remain there. We experience this every day when a scene from a film, a photograph or a painting suddenly superimposes itself upon a situation we encounter, lending it new brilliance, density or intensity. If a forest glade suddenly flashes into my attention as I round a bend, it is because it emerges from the depths of memory, charged with all the landscapes my eyes have seen and all the artworks about forests I have encountered. In that moment, the glade exists more strongly than everything around it. The experience of art creates memories that crystallise within us as inner images. And memory does not distinguish between the images created by artworks and those created outside of artworks[7]. The inner image of a glade is no less vivid whether it was born from a painting or from a walk in the forest. Memory makes no difference between art and life. This ability of art to remain within us as inner images—helping us see, feel and live more attentively—is one of the reasons that make art so vital and potentially meaningful to us.

It also gives art a particular importance today. At a time when many people live far from nature, when daily life in cities offers few opportunities for direct encounters with living beings, museums can help keep the

6 Excerpt from the Shadowbody Butoh Manual: https://butohmanual.com/flower-nerves/
7 See Eric Kandel, *The Age of Insight*, New York, Random House, 2012.

living world present in our minds. The practice of Inuit art as described by Waldemar Jochelson at the beginning of the 20th century offers a striking example. Carving bears, seals or loons and keeping them close—in a pocket, in the home—is a way of ensuring they do not leave us even when they are absent. It maintains relationships that matter and keeps animals present in thought[8]. Art, through its ability to populate us with inner images, can repopulate inner worlds that modern life has gradually emptied of animals, plants and landscapes. It offers a way—adapted to contemporary life—of maintaining living relationships with them and cultivating a sense of their importance for our identity as humans. For we only attribute value to beings that exist vividly in our inner lives. Art also prepares us to encounter them outside the museum. Being filled with inner images of forests makes real forests more desirable and meaningful. It also gives it greater intelligibility, created by the power of artistic work to isolate the lines of force of a being or an environment, as we saw above with the example of Bilders' birch.

The museum as a place of gratitude

But living beings appear in museums not only as subjects of artwork. The museum is also the place where we encounter the living world in a particular form: as transformed matter, as the material of works of art. This aspect can make us uneasy, because we hesitate to value nature for the use we make of it. Because we live in a world that overexploits nature for our own ends. Because we have inherited a culture that has too often reduced living beings into passive matter or mere resources. Yet this omnipresence of living matter in museums offers a powerful opportunity to connect with the living world. For if the living world matters, it is not only as lives that are full and autonomous outside of us, but also because it gives us everything we need every day to feed our bodies, to shelter us, to clothe us, to build our world. This aspect of the living world as material for our lives and bodies is an important part of how it exists in human lives. In many cultures, it is one of the central reasons why such great importance is attached to nature. The living world surrounds us everywhere as material in our daily lives, in every meal, in every room, in every building, every street, every work of art, and this could be a source of immense gratitude towards it: look at all it has given us, all it allows us to do. Yet we rarely see it because we experience a discontinuity between the lives that make ours possible and the objects that result from them. We do not see the living bodies of the poplar, the cotton, the wheat, the pig, behind the Ikea furniture, the T-shirt, the pasta and the glue. We only see the human act of transforming matter, and that is the only thing we value: so much work, we say. And so we do not see them, we do not see that our entire life rests on their shoulders, and we do not say thank you. Yet gratitude is undoubtedly one of the most powerful emotions that can connect us to the living world in a lasting way[9].

8 See Philippe Descola, *Forms of the Visible* (2021), London, Polity Books, 2025. In the French edition, the pages are 105-108.
9 See Robin Wall Kimmerer, *The Serviceberry*, London, Allen Lane, 2024.

The museum could be the place that makes visible what we owe to the living world, by making visible once again the lives that made possible the works we come to see and admire. Labels already list the materials used in artworks. But imagine if they read differently. Instead of *oil on canvas*, we might read *oak, flax, madder and cochineal*. Instead of *plastic*, we might read *Carboniferous plant fossils*. Instead of *paper*, we might read *maple*. This will inevitably create misunderstandings. Visitors might search for the maple leaf in a paper collage portraying the artist's mother. But it is precisely in this tension—in the effort to see the maple tree where it seems absent—that our ways of paying attention to the living world might begin to change. The museum could become a place that names the beings who have made art possible, listing their names throughout an exhibition and in art education so that they accompany us, so that we finally realise that they are everywhere, even when we are not in the forest, so that we recognise what we owe them. We owe them this beauty, these emotions, these works, even here within these four walls. It is their bodies, with their unique powers, that have made this possible.

Life is not outside the museum. It is simply a matter of learning to see it, even in one of its most discreet and yet most fundamental forms.

One final thought

The current ecological crisis is what first sparked my interest in the living world and led me to shift my research toward ecocritical art history. It is also what drives this desire to transform the art museum into a place where richer and deeper relationships with the living world can be nurtured. But the living world does not deserve to become a new focus of attention only because it is now being destroyed by capitalist extractivism. It deserves to stand at the centre of our cultural attention because it is essential to understanding who we are as humans; to grasping what being alive truly entails; and to making sense of what a life can mean. Addressing these timeless and urgent questions will only deepen the relevance of art museums in our collective lives.

Estelle Zhong Mengual (1989) is a French art historian. She received her doctorate from Sciences Po in Paris, where she taught for 6 years at the Master's in art and politics, founded by Bruno Latour. She is now in charge of a chair at the National School of Fine Arts in Paris, titled "Inhabiting the landscape". Her research regards our perception of the living world—past and present. In particular, she works on the development of an environmental art history based on environmental humanities and natural sciences. She is the author of several books, including *Apprendre à voir. Le point de vue du vivant* (Actes Sud, 2021) which has been translated into Dutch and Italian; and *Peindre au corps à corps. Les fleurs et Georgia O'Keeffe* (Actes Sud, 2022). In 2023, she co-created with choreographer Jérôme Bel the piece *Non human dances* which premiered at the Louvre Museum.

The network

Museum Sinclair-Haus

Museum Sinclair-Haus

How can I imagine the life in the soil beneath my feet? What is my relationship to animals, plants, stones, earth, and air—to the more-than-human world? What does the coexistence of different life forms (including humans) look like in cities and the countryside today and in the future? How can we learn from fungi? How are artists currently engaging with the living world? What emerges from the interaction between the arts and sciences?

Questions like these are at the heart of the exhibitions and art education at the Museum Sinclair-Haus.

Art and nature: An exhibition space for exploring the living world

The Museum Sinclair-Haus is the only contemporary art museum in Germany with a thematic focus on art and nature. By centering on the exploration of the structures of different living creatures, the exhibitions and art education programs raise awareness of the network of relationships in the more-than-human world—and the role that humans play in it. Kathrin Meyer, director of the Museum Sinclair-Haus, brings the term "eco-sensitivity" into the discussion of this approach:

> Eco-sensitive exhibitions use artistic, scientific, and practical approaches to make other animals, plants, fungi, or geological forms perceptible not as symbols, objects, or resources, but as fellow beings. An important ethical foundation for this is the recognition that every living being has its own perspective and shapes its environment accordingly. (Meyer 2025)

Eco-sensitive cultural work treats animals, plants, fungi, and even abiotic forms such as rocks perceptible as entities both distinct from and in relationships with humans. The approach thereby counteracts that alienation from the shared living world which French author and philosopher Baptiste Morizot calls a "crisis of sensibility" (2022).

This "relationship work" takes place in different yet complementary ways across the museum, particularly within art education, one of its key pillars. Exhibitions work through objects, spatial arrangements, staging, images, and texts, shaping relations through perception and interpretation. Art education, in contrast, foregrounds shared activity and experiential engagement as a mode of relating.

A child transforms into a mushroom. Holiday workshop for children aged 7–13 at the Museum Sinclair-Haus. Over the course of one week, artists work with the children in nature and in the studio, exploring themes related to the exhibition. Visual arts, music, and creative writing are combined. Photo: Linnan Zhang

Eco-sensitive art education: Perceiving the vitality of the world together

In urban, highly technological life worlds, there are few opportunities to experience the nonhuman sphere. There is a lack of stories and experiences with it. How can we use the means of art education to provide them—or invent new ways to do so—with a view to establishing relationships with plants, animals, fungi, the soil, and the natural cycles of life? How can we create occasions to experience the vibrance of the environment?

The eco-sensitive art education program at the Museum Sinclair-Haus aims to encourage people of different ages to experience the vitality of the world in diverse ways—both reflectively in the exhibition space and artistically and inquisitively in the studio or outdoors. In addition to workshops and guided tours, the museum also offers continuing education for teachers and cultural facilitators in the program entitled "Art Meets Nature: Networking and Shaping Cultural Education" (in cooperation with the Kulturfonds Frankfurt RheinMain since 2019).

In all activities, the focus is on participant's lived experience, personal impressions, and active engagement. Participants develop a sense of self-efficacy through artistic and creative processes such as working with their hands, exploring their surroundings, engaging all their senses, sharing experiences, and creating artifacts. Art education opens up spaces of possibility and resonance in which participants can explore their relationships with the living world. Visual arts practices are used to strengthen imagination and creativity and to nurture visions of possible futures, which collective thinking and experimentation can render tangible and imaginable.

The art education department works with the exhibitions and the museums' studio as well as with the surrounding space and the adjacent cultural landscape. Its formats include, for example, walks that combine biological knowledge and aesthetic experience. A distinctive feature of the museum's programme is its commitment to using artistic approaches to perceive the environment anew with all the human senses. This approach fosters the ability to slow down, engage with the unknown, and become familiar with other forms of life—through observing, discovering, and asking.

Alongside inspiring ideas about art, the art educators also share relevant factual knowledge, including basic insights into the climate and biodiversity crisis, and encourage a reflective stance towards anthropocentric perspectives—thereby intertwining knowledge, sensory experience, and aesthetic practice.

Overall, art education at the Museum Sinclair-Haus pursues three main goals:

a

to open up spaces for creative, aesthetic-exploratory engagement with artworks and artistic practices, fostering new ways of seeing and thinking,

b

to sensitize people to the living world through encounters with art and by encouraging their own artistic and exploratory inquiry beyond the artworks, thereby sharpening awareness of other species and our coexistence with them, and,

c

to create spaces for encounter, exchange, and community, in which shared experiences and forms of relating can emerge and evolve.

How can humans attune themselves to their environment? Child in the holiday workshop, adapting to nature. Children aged 7–13 spend one week working with artists in visual arts, creative writing, and music in response to the exhibition's themes.

A look at the practice

Art education at the Museum Sinclair-Haus operates as an integrated practice that connects engagement with art and engagement with the living world. It includes approaches to artworks that introduce participants to methods of art analysis, artistic techniques, and contemporary artistic practices. At the same time, it draws on the museum's exhibitions as starting points for perceiving, experiencing, and aesthetically exploring the more-than-human world. Through collaborative forms of working, art education fosters sensory awareness and creates situations in which social, aesthetic, and ecological dimensions become interrelated and experientially tangible.

For example, in the exhibition *Unter Pflanzen* (Among Plants, 2025), art education invited participants in holiday courses and school workshops to develop new forms of attentiveness towards plants, to encounter them differently, and to playfully explore what it might mean to become plant-like—for instance by wearing phytogenic body extensions and costumes. A similar interest in relational perception shaped the exhibition *Pilze—Verflochtene Welten* (Fungi—Intertwined Worlds, 2024). Inspired by fungi as large, filamentous organisms living in symbiosis with plants and largely existing below ground, participants collectively knitted, wove, and constructed networks as embodied explorations of interconnection. In *Wälder. Von der Romantik in die Zukunft* (Forests: From Romanticism into the Future, 2024), participants wrote love letters to trees, exploring emotional and ethical relations to forest ecosystems.

Across these diverse formats, art education functions as a practice of shifting perception: it creates situations in which participants explore forms of becoming-with other life forms and develop more attentive, affective, and ethical relations to the more-than-human world.

Strategies, attitudes, and perspectives of eco-sensitive art education at the Museum Sinclair-Haus

Eco-sensitive art education—Drawing on the arts to meet the living world with knowledge, empathy, and vulnerability

1. Strategies of art education

- Fostering relational awareness and more-than-human kinship: understanding oneself as part of interconnected networks of life and cultivating empathy, solidarity, and care across species boundaries
- Expanding sensory and aesthetic perception: deepening attention to the living world through encounters with artworks, environments, and artistic practices; fostering enthusiasm, joy, and wonder at the beauty of the living world
- Enabling artistic experimentation and imaginative practice: strengthening self-efficacy, expression, play, imagination and creative exploration through artistic action
- Developing interdisciplinary perspectives: combining artistic, scientific, and other forms of knowledge to open new understandings of the living world and human–nature relations
- Creating spaces for encounter, exchange, and community: fostering openness, cultural participation, and shared learning while counteracting isolation through collective experience

2. Orientations of art education

- Embracing emotional openness and relational engagement: acknowledging feelings, lived experiences, and vulnerability as integral parts of engaging with museum themes and exhibitions
- Practicing care and responsibility: fostering solidarity and attentiveness to relations, engaging responsibly with resources and others, and allowing time for slow, emergent aesthetic and learning processes that unfold and transform over time
- Prioritizing inquiry over answers: encouraging questioning, storytelling, philosophical reflection, and attentive listening as core modes of engagement

3. Methods of art education

- Drawing on artistic and aesthetic research practices: using media such as painting, drawing, printing, photography, and other techniques as experimental tools, prioritizing process over technical mastery or finished outcomes
- Engaging the body and senses: incorporating physical, mindfulness, and perception-based exercises that activate embodied and multisensory awareness
- Exploring relational and perspectival shifts: using storytelling, creative writing, visual analysis, and philosophical reflection to open empathetic and perspective-changing approaches to other living beings (while remaining attentive to ecological and biological complexity)
- Expanding learning spaces beyond the museum: working in urban, peripheral, and everyday environments to connect art education with lived experience and diverse social contexts
- Designing interdisciplinary formats: combining artistic and scientific modes of inquiry, for example through walks and field-based practices that integrate aesthetic attention and ecological observation

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Our nature is not the same

Bad Homburg is located in central Germany, within the Rhine–Main region near Frankfurt. The town lies at the foot of the Taunus, a low mountain range whose highest peak, the Großer Feldberg, reaches 879 metres. Much of the Taunus is characterized by extensive forests, which are currently undergoing a structural transition. As climatic conditions change, areas affected by drought are transforming into new, dynamic ecosystems, where pioneer species emerge naturally alongside managed forestry. The surrounding landscape forms a diverse mosaic: bustling urban infrastructures and industrial areas alternate with agricultural land, cultural landscapes, and conservation zones. This close coexistence of dense human settlement and resilient natural spaces defines the specific ecological fabric of our region.

WORKSHOP Phytomorphization —An Artistic Approach

Growing, breathing, resonating: Which plant would you like to be for a day? Would you be a tree, a roadside weed, or a cultivated plant? What colors, shapes, and movements would define you as a plant?

Let us explore what it might mean to think and act like a plant. Observe a plant closely, treat it as a counterpart rather than an object, and notice how it exists, grows, and responds to its environment. If it moves—even slightly—allow your body to echo its gestures. Consider its conditions of life: How does it grow? What does it need? What kind of environment allows it to thrive?

We are already deeply entangled with plant life: through the oxygen we breathe, the food we eat, the materials we wear, and the medicines we use. For this workshop, however, we shift attention away from use and function, and focus instead on plants as living beings with their own ways of existing.

Let's transform ourselves! Start your journey of discovery with small accessories, costumes, or some body paint, or even by inventing a story about your plant self, a drawing of your plant transformation, or a collage.

What you need

Building supplies: thick paper, kraft paper, paper milk cartons, cardboard boxes, fabric, used clothing (including tights), sticks, wire, found objects to use for building things (e.g., hula hoops, lampshades, garden hose)

Materials for connecting, gluing, and assembling things: masking tape, water activated tape, a stapler, a needle and thread, a cutter and straight edge, a hole punch and string, a bone folder, a scissors or wire cutter

During the 2025 school vacation course, children “phytomorphized” themselves. They made masks and botanical body extensions. Photos © Museum Sinclair-Haus

What to do
"Building a Plant Costume"

Which plant would you like to portray and experience? What kind of being are you becoming? You can choose the plant from nature or invent that has never existed. Let your imagination and perception guide you. What story does your chosen plant carry? Is it on the "Red List" of endangered species? Does it have healing powers and can be used as medicine? What forms of growth, texture, or reproduction define it? For inspiration, you can look at plants in books and touch them along the wayside and in the parks. Closely study the shape of the plant's flowers, stems, and leaves. What does its fruits and pollen look like? What else do you notice? What would the plant tell you if you listened to it with all your intuition?

Start by making a sketch of your plant costume or small plant accessories. How can your body or just some parts of it become a plant? Work with materials to translate your plant into a wearable form. Cut, fold, twist, and assemble paper, fabric, and found objects into a costume that extends your body. Paper can be folded or twisted. You can create curls out of paper strips by pulling them over a hard edge, like with a ribbon. The sheets of paper, fabric, and cardboard can be connected with staples, tape, thread, or string. After punching holes in the pieces, you can tie them together. You can also attach flowers you've made and leaves to your T-shirt, socks, hat, pant legs, etc. with a needle and thread or staples.

Work collaboratively if possible: one person may construct while another tries on and adjusts the form. Allow the material to guide you—its resistance, flexibility, and unpredictability. Your plant-body may evolve away from your original idea.

Let the plant grow freely.

In a bed painted with petals, children empathized with our cohabitants, the plants.

During the 2025 school vacation course, children “phytomorphized” themselves. They made masks and botanical body extensions. In a bed painted with petals, they empathized with our cohabitants, the plants.

Creative writing exercise

Write down all of the contacts you have with plants on a normal day.

My day today has been very full of ...

When I woke up this morning (cotton, beech tree), I was thinking about my dream (corals, algae, anemones). I showered (lavender, argan tree), got dressed (cotton, linen, petroleum-based synthetics), and put cream (rose) on my face. Then I made Earl Grey tea (bergamot, tea leaves) with oat milk (oats, soy), toast with jam (wheat, spelt, currants), took a supplement (gingko, ginger), packed my lunch (spelt, onions, broccoli, paprika, oregano, carrots, beets), and watered my houseplants (silver vine, Christmas cactus, spider plant, Chinotto, porcelain flower, Clivia). While brushing my teeth (Echinacea), I looked out the window (maple tree, grass, snowdrops, hazelnut scrub, ivy, apple tree). I printed out a text (spruce, pine) and packed it in my backpack (petroleum-based synthetics) ...

Text: Kristine Preuß

What would it feel like to be a plant? How does it sense the world? How does it live,
and what does it need?

WORKSHOP Forming Networks —Connections in Plaster

Mushrooms on pizza, or Amanita toadstools on the forest floor are familiar images of fungi. Yet what we usually see are only the fruiting bodies—comparable to the apples of a tree. The largest part of the organism remains hidden underground or within wood, forming vast networks of filaments: the mycelium. Through thin strands called hyphae, fungi grow toward sources of nourishment.[1]

Fungi exist as networks in constant exchange. Around 90% of plants (in Germany) live in symbiotic relationships with mycorrhizal fungi, exchanging nutrients and information. Many sac fungi (ascomycetes) can only survive in close association with algae or cyanobacteria, forming lichens as composite organisms.

These living systems offer an inspiring way of thinking about connection not as structure, but as ongoing relation. Let us explore this idea by building a tangible, collaborative network–playful, and in the flow.

What you need

Plaster bandages, a scissors, branches of various types, sizes, and shapes, a pruning shears, flat bowls of water for wetting the plaster bandages, and paper towels

1 In addition to the filamentous organisms there is a second type of fungus, the yeasts, which live in clusters of individual cells. To date, only about 120, 000 species of fungi have been identified, with around 3.8 million species presumed to exist around the world.

What to do

This exercise works well in pairs or small groups. Together, you will construct a spatial network from branches and plaster.

Prepare by cutting plaster bandages into strips of approximately 3 cm by 15–20 cm. Fill a bowl with water.

One person holds two or more branches in a crossed position while another wraps the intersection with a damp plaster strip, forming a joint. Continue by alternating roles and adding more branches.

As the structure grows, it begins to form a three-dimensional network. Decide together when the structure feels complete—not as a fixed form, but as a moment of temporary balance.

Art education in the public. Through collaborative work a structure emerges, forming a free and randomly shaped network of branches and plaster bandages.
Photos © Museum Sinclair-Haus

The plaster sets quickly, creating firm connections. A fragile yet stable network emerges through exchange, collaboration, and mutual making—often without words.

Through collaborative work a structure emerges, forming a free and randomly shaped network of branches and plaster bandages.

A structure continues to grow, a network shaped by many different people. People of all ages connect and collaborate. Photo: Anja Jahn

Photos © Museum Sinclair-Haus, Anja Jahn

WORKSHOP Creative Machines for the Future

Current ecological and social crises pose profound challenges: species extinction, climate change, extreme weather events, pollution, and more. Responding to them calls not only for knowledge, but also for imagination, care, solidarity, courage and creative experimentation.[2]

Let us explore how artistic thinking can open up spaces for imagining and testing possible futures. Together, we will develop speculative "machines"—small prototypes for responding to real-world questions, whether large or small.

What you need

Paper and pens for drafting drawings, wire, bast fiber, glue, tape, scraps of paper, packaging materials, nets, skewers, scissors, pliers, stopwatch

During the 2022 "Wandelmut" (Courage to Change) vacation course, children built a "courage-tapping machine" with an old vacuum cleaner. What would your courage-machine look like? What do you need courage for and how can you access it? Photo © Museum Sinclair-Haus

2 According to the 4C model, communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking are of paramount importance in the 21st century.

What to do

Inspired by elements of Design Thinking, we will collectively and playfully develop small experimental prototypes in five phases. Begin by choosing a shared focus: What question interests your group? For example: How might we respond to light pollution? Or: How can we deepen our relationship with the living world?

Form groups of three to five participants.

1. Individual exploration (3 minutes)
Each person gathers initial ideas independently. Let thinking move freely—through drawing, mapping, writing, or associative notes. There are no constraints.

2. Sharing (1 minute per person)
Present your ideas to your group. Listen to each other without immediate evaluation.

3. Collective selection (2 minutes)
Together, choose one idea to develop further. This is not about finding the "best" idea, but a shared direction to explore.

4. Prototyping (25 minutes)
Construct a physical model of your idea using the available materials. Decide together how to develop and refine it as it takes form.

5. Presentation & testing (7 minutes)
Present your prototype to the group. Observe how others respond. The emphasis is on experimentation, imagination, play and exchange rather than final solutions.

Note
You may be familiar with certain geoengineering and technological problem-solving approaches, such as devices designed to collect plastic waste in the oceans. Indonesian designers, for example, have proposed a submarine that would refreeze sea ice.

Such proposals are often framed as innovative responses to ecological crises. At the same time, they have been criticized for not addressing underlying causes—such as greenhouse gas emissions—and for potentially shifting attention away from more effective systemic measures.

Louisiana Museum of Modern Art

Louisiana Museum of Modern Art
Growing new relations with nature

The interplay between nature and art has always been at the heart of Louisiana Museum of Modern Art ever since museum opened in 1958. Louisiana is situated close by the sea, and the landscape is characterized by a magnificent park with slopes, old, rare trees and a small lake. The aim of the founder Knud W. Jensen was to create an open and unpretentious setting for a collection of modern art, and for this reason the relations among nature, art and architecture were key.

Louisiana's architecture was planned in respect to the original landscape and placed in the periphery of the park. The two architects, Jørgen Bo and Vilhelm Wohlert, wanted to increase the possibilities of enjoying the scenery, so they explored and walked the grounds for months before starting to draw and design. In this way they got to know the terrain literally through the soles of their feet, deciding which trees to keep, and how the buildings could respond to the sunlight gradually moving from hour to hour.

Louisiana Museum of Modern Art / Kim Hansen

Louisiana Museum of Modern Art / Frederik Højfeldt Nielsen

From the start the museum was a new type of institution that attached equal importance to various forms of visual art as well as film, architecture and music. Still today, Louisiana remains a meeting ground not only for different art forms and visitors, but also for a broad spectrum of writers, artists and scientists giving lectures and live talks.

Steps towards sustainability

In recent years, Louisiana has worked ambitiously to make the museum more sustainable. This includes climate control, exhibition design, the transportation of the art works, the food served in the cafe and products sold in the shop etc. Yet, a different path is the focus on social sustainability in the learning programme alongside an attempt to strengthen future generations' knowledge and curiosity about nature through art. Recent research reveals that children today spend less than 10 % of their day outside and therefore their first-hand experience and knowledge about nature are limited. For this reason, Louisiana has developed a new learning programme called 'Nature through Art' based on the belief that in order to respect and care for nature you need to feel an emotional connection—that it matters and that you too are part of nature. The programme is aimed at Louisiana's youngest visitors from kindergarten and early school years. Indirectly, it also involves their pedagogues, teachers, siblings, parents and grandparents through other activities included in the programme such as films, an activity book and a family day.

Art as an invitation to explore

The basic idea is to let artworks serve as an invitation for children to explore and experience nature. In other words, it is an opportunity for children through art to use their senses, to discover the wonders of nature and to reflect on themselves as part of nature. It is an outdoor programme where the children study a number of artworks in Louisiana's sculpture garden. The artworks inspire them to make experiments on their own as a way to share their findings with one another in these visual formats. The decision to focus on the sculptural garden is made in order to bring the children closer to a richer and more varied natural context than we can offer inside the galleries.

The children visit Louisiana three times to work with three different, but interrelated themes:

1. Nature's materials
2. Nature's forces
3. Nature's (de)tours

Louisiana Museum of Modern Art / Frederik Højfeldt Nielsen

Louisiana Museum of Modern Art / Kim Hansen

The artworks chosen for 'Nature's materials' are a couple of sculptures by Max Ernst and Joan Miro. Both artists made their sculptures from found materials from nature. Assemblage is the name of this method. Miro made a sculpture—a personage—combining a small stone with an almond nut. Combined they form the body of this extraterrestrial-looking creature. In the workshop the children are to find natural material themselves to make a sculpture of their own. At the end they draw a portrait of their sculpture for them to keep as a memory as they dismantle their sculptures and let the materials go back to nature.

Max Ernst produced three sculptures—an owl, a frog and a turtle. Three animals which all hatch from eggs. Do they belong to the same family, or what is the intrinsic order of nature? The sculptures do not copy nature, but they are abstractions of animals. The turtle has e.g. shield that looks like a leaf of a waterlily. The children make their own small families of different animals by collecting different leaves as they start. They use a rubbing technique called frottage placing the leaf underneath a sheet of paper and rubbing the pencil across the paper which brings out the shape and structure of the leaf. Afterwards, they add eyes, mouths, claws and tails to turn them into small creatures.

Without going deeper into the next two themes, the theme 'Nature's forces' deals with questions of gravity, heat, wind and pressure. These questions are explored through sculptures by Alicja Kwade, Nobou Sekine and Alexander Calder. Inspired by the artists, the children experiment with drip painting, watercolour portraits of planets and acts of balance eg. when building mobiles from sticks and twigs.

The theme 'Nature's (de)tours' explores the landscape to discover and observe its distinct characteristics. The children pay attention to contrasts such as steep/flat, light/shadow, open/closed, wilderness/cultivation inspired by site specific works by Richard Serra and George Trakas. The children are later to create their own secret route through the park.

Finding interdisciplinary playmates

The programme 'Art through Nature' has existed since 2020, and it has been adjusted and qualified through collaboration with the Forrest and Landscape College and University College Copenhagen. The ideas and results have been shared at an annual Big Bang-conference with science teachers. They are fundamentally tied to the potential of art to strengthen the children's ability to pay attention and feel physically present as a body in a physical world. Art can help to nurture their curiosity and through making also create moments of wonder when natural phenomena are uncovered and stand out from the totality of nature, thus made visible. Finally, art works can be seen as invitations to the interdisciplinary, thus opening the natural world to more children than the ones who find it easy to grasp math and science.

Louisiana Museum of Modern Art / Photo by Danilo Krstajic

In our view it is essential that future generations understand themselves as part of nature and how deeply interwoven nature and human life are. This is why both art and nature-based learning play a vital role: art helps children sense, imagine and emotionally connect with the living world, while direct experiences of nature teach them responsibility, curiosity and care. Together, they foster the awareness and creativity needed to protect the landscapes that define us.

Louisiana Museum of Modern Art / Photo by Elisabeth Bodin

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Lie Pia Marie & J., Mariegaard, S. (2025): Sans for Science, Reitzels forlag

Our nature is not the same

In Denmark, the horizon is rarely interrupted. The landscape is low and open, shaped by centuries of agriculture, and truly wild nature covers only about 1–2% of the country. Apart from the recent return of wolves, the most "dangerous" wild creature remains one of the smallest: the tick.

As a small nation, Denmark is defined by its closeness to the sea. Nowhere in the country you will find yourself more than 52 kilometres from the coast, and the coastline stretches for more than 7,300 kilometres. This intricate fringe of land and water has shaped Danish culture: a maritime history, a strong fishing tradition, and a school system in which all children are to be taught to swim.

Another characteristic of the Danish relationship with nature is its everydayness. Nature is not distant or dramatic but woven into daily life—into commutes, weekend walks, cycling routes and childhood memories. Yet this familiarity hides a tension: Danish waters, especially the fjords, are increasingly threatened by heavily fertilized farmland, and biodiversity continues to decline.

WORKSHOP 1 Alicja Kwade
Space Travel

Louisiana Museum of Modern Art / Kim Hansen

- The Polish German artist Alicja Kwade (born 1978) is a bit of a magician. She makes sculptures and installations and enjoys making materials and surfaces do something different. She once crushed a computer and used the dust to make a vase, transforming one kind of container (for information) into another kind of container (for flowers). She also made a gigantic clock look like a planet by hanging it in a chain from the ceiling where it rotates. She plays with the ways we try to understand and 'manage' the world—time, money and models of the universe. Unlike nature, the systems people make can always be rethought and changed when we learn something new.

The moon has always fascinated people. It inspires poets to write about its silvery light in the dark and astronauts to dream of planting a flag up there. The pull of the moon decides whether the sea is at low tide or high tide. The moon only shines because it reflects the light of the sun. When it looks a different shape, it is because the shadow of the Earth gets in the way and blocks the light.

The artist Alicja Kwade has brought the moon and a slice of the universe down to earth in a sculpture with eight round stone orbs at Louisiana. One of them is white with grey patches and looks like the moon. Even though the orbs are made of really heavy stone they look as if they're resting lightly on the earth.

The stones have been sanded and polished until they are totally smooth and we can see different layers and colours on the surface—a picture of the powerful forces deep down in the earth. The orbs lie on the grass, but they make our imaginations fly—out into the universe and down into the ground.

In this activity you are going to make your own watercolour moon.

What you need

- Watercolours
- Watercolour paper
- A compass
- Paintbrushes
- A jar of water

What to do

- Look forward to the next full moon and go outside and look at it. Use a telescope if you can find one or look at pictures of the moon online—on NASA's website, for example.
- Notice the shape of the moon and the colours and shadows on its surface.
- Take a sheet of watercolour paper (preferably A3) and draw a big circle on the paper with the compass. Dip a paintbrush in water and make the whole circle wet.
- What do you want your moon to look like? Choose colours that match the atmosphere you want to create: cool bluish white, thrilling red or spellbinding yellow? Paint the moon with curved brushstrokes that follow the round shape of the moon. Then paint the craters and mountains that create shadows when the sun shines on them.
- If you want your moon to have the company of stars or planets draw new circles with your compass.
- Make them wet before you choose a colour for them too.
- Then you can fill in the sky around them.

Louisiana Museum of Modern Art / Frederik Højfeldt Nielsen

Did you know?

The moon is a piece of earth that got broken off and hurled into space after a crash with a meteor. Scientists discovered this by testing the stones astronauts have brought back from the moon. These stones are made of the same material as earth and are the same age.

Louisiana Museum of Modern Art / Frederik Højfeldt Nielsen

WORKSHOP 2 Per Bak Jensen Blue Ice

Per Bak Jensen, Disko Bay, 2007

We can see with our own eyes how planet Earth changes all the time. The giant icebergs in Greenland, for example, are made of the same water they float in, so when the icebergs 'sweat', they melt and slowly turn back into seawater.

The Danish photographer Per Bak Jensen has captured the icebergs of Greenland with his camera. The oldest iceberg has a special blue colour. That is because the air bubbles in the ice have been compacted over the years. Snow, on the other hand, is ice full of air bubbles so it looks totally white.

We usually talk about light as white, but it actually consists of many colours—in fact all the colours you see in a rainbow—red, orange, yellow, green, blue and purple. When the air bubbles in icebergs are compacted only some of the light can get through—the blue part.

In this activity you can make icebergs and capture the light in melting ice with a camera or a smartphone.

- Corn fields, bales of hay and road signs, plastic rubbish, trees and icebergs. These are just some of the things Danish artist Per Bak Jensen (born 1949) photographs. He studied at an art academy, but he is known for taking photographs of things that are rarely seen in art. His works are not quick snapshots and he does not manipulate them digitally afterwards. The things in the photographs are exactly as Per Bak Jensen finds them in real life. But he spends a lot of time choosing what to photograph and finding the right light. Per Bak Jensen says he wants to find out what life is and register the traces it leaves. His pictures are often big because it is important for him that they look as close to reality as possible. As he says: "What you hang is a piece of reality".

What you need

- Water
- Blue paint (so you can cheat and make the ice blue!)
- Plastic containers (like ice-cream or yoghurt tubs)
- A sharp stick or large nail
- A hammer
- A camera or smartphone

Louisiana Museum of Modern Art / Frederik Højfeldt Nielsen

Louisiana Museum of Modern Art / Frederik Højfeldt Nielsen

What to do

- Pour water two thirds of the way up your container. Water expands as it freezes, so don't fill it to the top.
- Stir the blue paint into the water until it's absorbed and the water is an even colour.
- Put the container of blue water in the freezer for about 12 hours until it is frozen solid.
- Take your block of ice out of the container. Make an iceberg by putting a sharp stick or a nail into the ice and hitting it with a hammer so small chips of ice fall off.
- When your ice sculpture is finished, take a photo. You can also take photos during its creation. Ice melts so you will be able to see how your sculpture changed during the process.

Note

Your sculpture might end up looking different from what you had imagined. Ice is difficult to control, because it is hard but also melts as you work.

Moderna Museet

Moderna Museet

"Art can hold a space in which we move from the arm's-length knowledge of facts, figures and projections to the kind of knowledge that we let inside us, taking the risk that it may change us." *Dougald Hine, Writer.*

Moderna Museet is Sweden's national museum for modern and contemporary art. Founded in Stockholm in 1958, Moderna Museet is today one museum across two locations: a large museum on a peaceful, tree-lined island in central Stockholm at the entrance to the Baltic, and a more intimate museum in a converted power station in the commercial centre of Malmö, with a vibrant and diverse community on its doorstep. One collection and one vision across both sites, each adapted to its unique context and community. Both museums move beyond literal landscape to interpret nature through art via creative and critical inquiry—encompassing conceptual frameworks for engagement and community activism.

Since opening, the museum has earned a reputation for pioneering playful, inclusive and experimental artistic practice—a place where artists' creativity is centred. This experimental legacy is alive today, embodied in the Moderna Museet manifesto which states that the museum should be an agent of societal change—a call to action for programming and exhibitions relating to the environmental crisis.

The following projects demonstrate approaches and questions that can be adapted to different contexts and scales:

Moderna Museet, Stockholm

Through dialogue, thought and artmaking we raise questions about nature and make visible our role in the Anthropocene. Over the past decade, we have worked with socially engaged artists, partnered in university research, provided platforms for local activists, and fostered creative collaboration—all with a focus on climate change.

Museums hold collective memories and stories that reshape perspectives. Exhibitions expand knowledge and stir emotions—catalysts for transformation. Through art, we explore what matters and how to effect change, particularly in times of crisis.

Engaging with nature and environmental crisis through art creates visceral reactions that awaken us from indifference. Things we thought we knew appear in new light. Nature through art stimulates action and nurtures empathy towards all living things, including ourselves.

Nature Connection and Philosophical Workshops

Connecting young people to nature builds resilience against climate anxiety and encourages environmental stewardship. We developed art and philosophical enquiry workshops that focused on artworks that depicted nature, for example Henri Matisse's *Moroccan Landscape (Acanthus)* (1912). When participants slowed down to really look closely, they experienced and connected to the painting in new ways, becoming immersed in lush greenery and warm sunlight in a rain-soaked garden—a landscape and climate they may never have encountered. Thinking openly and philosophically helped them explore nature's symbolism, feel its presence, recognize kinship with the natural world, and expand world views, seeing through a different lens—providing connection with what might otherwise remain distant. A close encounter with nature through an artwork in a museum raises broader questions about humanity, nature and culture. Where does culture begin and nature end?

Which artworks in your collection could spark conversations about humanity's relationship with nature and serve as a gateway to nature connection and environmental dialogue with young people?

Working with contemporary Artists

We have engaged the museum's close relationship with contemporary artists to support activity in digital engagement and socially engaged participation.

Digital engagement—Acclimatize was a participatory online platform sharing video interviews with renowned artists engaging with

Henri Matisse, Paysage Marocain, 1911, oil on canvas, 115 × 80 cm. Moderna Museet.
Photo: Albin Dahlström/Moderna Museet.

environmental sustainability, including Olafur Eliasson, Maria Friberg and Sir Isaac Julien. This digital material inspired the public to create their own responses to the climate crisis and share them on the platform. An editorial blog framed the conversation with contributions from leading climate researchers. During three months, over 300 people of all ages and from around the world contributed their artwork, not only raising awareness but also connecting community through creative agency and active hope—an antidote to hopelessness and despair. The platform demonstrated how digital spaces can democratize environmental dialogue, reaching audiences beyond traditional museum visits.

What digital platforms could extend your museum's reach and create participation that turn climate anxiety into creative agency?

Socially Engaged Practice

Marking 'Stockholm +50', an international UN meeting on sustainable development held in Stockholm in 2022, we invited Turner Prize-winning artist Jeremy Deller to create an intervention focused on food—one of the most important factors in staying within planetary boundaries. Working with one of the museums learning curators and a food production company, the project created God Grön (Good Green) energy bars made from sustainable ingredients including sugar kelp from Sweden's west

coast. On the final day of the conference, museum staff and volunteers launched a campaign distributing nearly 10,000 energy bars across Stockholm—available only for that single day—with slogans including "Mat är klimat!" (food is climate) and "Kelp helps!"

Deller expanded the project, working with the museum's head chef, by serving 5,000 schoolchildren a sustainable kelp-based meal at their schools featuring yellow pea falafels, sugar kelp pesto, and insect protein granola. Students watched a video of Deller explaining his process before being served—"much to some of their disgust" as he wrote in *Art Is Magic* (2024). Politicians, policy makers, students and the public were invited to experience and digest new understanding about sustainable food choices—both literally and figuratively. This socially engaged practice reframed food development as activism, bringing sea kelp as a sustainable food option into the public realm. Both joyous and transformative, it exemplified how experimental practice and art can catalyze social change.

How could your museum partner with artists and sustainable industries to foster environmental awareness within your community?

Museum as a platform for local activism—Fridays for Future

In connection with the exhibition "Monica Sjöö: The Great Cosmic Mother", youth-led climate movement Fridays for Future Stockholm organized banner-making sessions in Moderna Museet's workshop, inviting visitors to create banners for climate strikes—echoing Sjöö's practice of creating bold, politically charged imagery for social and environmental change. The newly made banners were displayed outside the exhibition alongside historic banners from the movement's first global strikes—including "School strike for the climate" and "People Not Profit". The banners remained available for activists to borrow for demonstrations, transforming the museum into an active resource for ongoing activism. How could your museum spotlight and support local activist movements by providing space, resources, and visibility for their work?

MISTRA ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION Since 2019, Moderna Museet has partnered with the Mistra Environmental Communication research programme, using our learning programmes to explore how people respond emotionally and intellectually to climate communication through art, most recently exploring engagement with the artwork of Sami artist Britta Marakatt-Labba. This academic research brings rigour to our practice, with outcomes informing our developing programmes. As part of the partnership, we hosted a symposium for museum professionals across Sweden on museums as sites of transformation. A further output has been a practical toolkit for museum workers navigating the environmental crisis, the key principles to underpin museum practice are listed below. This partnership demonstrates how museums can simultaneously develop their practice while contributing knowledge to the wider sector.

Guiding principles for museums in times of environmental crisis

HOPE Research in environmental communication highlights hope as something central to our ability to transition to a sustainable future.

COURAGE Dare to discuss difficult questions and embrace different opinions.

RIGHT-SIZING Adapt operations to opportunities. How often do we change exhibitions and for whose benefit?

WALK THE TALK Actions must match words.

THE VIRTUE OF SLOWNESS Offer opportunities for reflection. Focus on a radically deepened presence instead of a constant flow of news.

SIT WITH THE SHIT A variation on Donna Haraway's *Staying with the trouble*. In other words, be open to facing difficulties with acceptance and courage instead of denial and numbness.

VISIBLE COMPLEXITY Making things visible is often more important than providing ready-made explanations.

DELIVERY ROOM AND HOSPICE Museums can be both a delivery room for innovation and new perspectives and a hospice for what we must leave behind and give up.

THE FUTURE HAS NOT YET HAPPENED therefore, it can be influenced. Create connections between history, the present, and the future.

ACT COLLECTIVELY Neighbouring museums can collaborate, for example by working on a common theme, based on their specific collections and conditions.

GENEROSITY It is liberating to admit mistakes. We can learn from each other's successes and
setbacks. Generosity builds trust.

EMBRACE THE UNMANAGEABLE The environmental crisis affects virtually every aspect of human experience. Instead of striving for a perfect narrative, strive for creating a sense of community in vulnerability.

How could research partnerships transform both your programmes and contribute to sector-wide learning?

Moderna Museet Malmö

Among the museums in the network, Moderna Museet Malmö is a strange bird. We are not situated in close proximity to nature; we have no green space. We are in the city, surrounded by an urban environment, streets, traffic, buildings which we share with a close community. More than half the world's population live in cities and there is even a term Solastaglia to describe the loss of known relationship with the landscape. It is clear that there is a need for ways to connect with nature in urban settings. We aim to be a place where visitors can engage in inquiry through making, get the conversation started or build on it, where we dare to embrace activism and indigenous and non-western forms of knowledge to the center through collaboration and art exhibitions, where we examine craft, and where we enjoy a long-standing exchange of knowledge between art educators and nature educators.

How might you explore an urban setting to consider nature's presence in the city?

Inquiry through making

Since 2023 we increased the number of opportunities at the museum to engage in inquiry through making. To give the process more space beyond the traditional workshop areas and to appeal to a greater range of ages, we integrate making into our exhibitions and organize social contexts around creating. The focus might be drawing, embroidering, and weaving. Inquiry through making means spending time with art and creation– twisting, turning, honing, feeling, and thinking through embodied practices -technique, materials, and movement. When creation is allowed the space it needs, our understanding of what a museum can be deepens, and new conversations grow forth. It is essential that the act of creating is given space, that it is granted an equivalent status to knowledge and as a means of approaching art. Through making, visitors engage with natural materials directly—feeling the weight of clay, the texture of plant fibers, the resistance of wood—building embodied knowledge of the natural world that intellectual understanding alone cannot provide.

How can your setting use inquiry through making to support connection with the natural world that visitors might otherwise miss through observation alone?

The Textile Thread

Textiles has gained attention as a central element of contemporary art, but also as a field in which many people carry unique experiences, memories, and knowledge. At the museum we have introduced long-range immersion in textile techniques and in recurring activities such as Mending Club and after work knitting groups, we find an intense longing to meet and connect through knitting, embroidery, and mending. Why crafts? Handicrafts embody knowledge and experience that can contribute to resistance and sustainability. Knowledge about natural materials, plant-based dyes, local wool, linen from flax etc—techniques, and recycling, communicated through generations, can serve as a resource in our shift toward a sustainable society.

How else might your visitors explore sustainable practices embedded in craft traditions passed down through generations?

Hosting climate action

Extending the activist approaches from the Monica Sjöö exhibition to our local context we worked with Mother's Rebellion, a climate activism association of mothers that was first established in Malmö and has become a growing global community on six continents. For one day, the group served as hosts for the museum's activities. Poster painting, textile printing, and choral singing were some of the activities, in addition there were several knitting workshops in the museum café. Visitors participated in the knitting of a red scarf that marks a red line for the climate, a part of an ongoing, long-term knitting project called "Knitting for the Climate" that aims to raise awareness of Sweden's overshoot day–the day when the nation has exhausted the ecological budget for the year. Working with activists is a way to activate, connect people to each other, exchange in dialogue and share knowledge.

How can you foster community, connection, and creative collaboration to further understand and respond to the climate crisis?

Beyond the museum

To create physical proximity to nature, we have had a long-term collaboration with Fulltofta public recreation area, about 50 kilometers from Malmö. The site has diverse natural features–hardwood forest, grazed meadows, open glades, and wetlands– where we arrange day camps for art during summer break as well as programs for school groups during the fall and spring semesters. In Fulltofta, we connect art to nature more concretely and create collaboration between nature educators and art educators. The knowledge of making and analyzing merges with scientific curiosity when we observe, review and reflect our surroundings. It is an exchange that grows with each passing year.

How can contemporary art practices inform outdoor learning in natural environments?

Our nature is not the same

Malmö is located at the southwestern tip of Sweden, in the province of Scania (Skåne), along the coast of the Öresund, with Copenhagen on the other side of the strait.

The Municipality of Malmö has a rich variety of natural environments. Half of its area consists of sea. Within the municipality, the waters are shallow, and currents from the Kattegat make them rich in oxygen. Malmö's land areas form part of the open plains of southwestern Scania. Agriculture has played a crucial role here for a long time. The landscape includes pastures, hay meadows, and fields—natural environments shaped by farming.

Within the city, there are other important natural features. Tree-lined avenues along roads, trees in parks and residential areas, gardens, and allotments provide greenery and serve as habitats for birds, insects, lichens, mosses, and many other species. The parks also contain bodies of water which, together with ponds in the agricultural landscape, support ecosystems that include birds and amphibians.

Textile workshop, Moderna Museet Malmö. Photo: Alexandra Giertz/Moderna Museet

Drawing workshop, Moderna Museet Malmö. Photo: Britte Lillevars/ Moderna Museet

An example of integrating making into our exhibitions. Visitor embroidery in “Fantastic and Horrific. Marija Prymachenko and Works From the Moderna Museet Collection” Moderna Museet Malmö, 2025. Photo: Alexandra Giertz/Moderna Museet

WORKSHOP Seed Bombs—an easy and fun way to support urban biodiversity

Seed bombs are an easy way to support a variety of insects and pollinators that otherwise couldn't survive in urban and built-up spaces. They are a hands-on way to engage with and improve your public environment. Throwing or planting seed bombs is an easy way to brighten up your environment, whether it's a plant pot on your balcony, a flower bed or a wild area in your garden or even creating a meadow. Connect with your community, share and swap and plant seed bombs together.

What you need

- 2 parts natural clay, (powdered clay from a clay shop or clay soil)
- 1 part peat-free compost (peat is as a fossil fuel and should be avoided)
- ½ part seed mix of your choice (use seeds native to your local area to avoid introducing invasive species)
- Water, added gradually to hold the mixture together

Illustration: Sofia Djerf/Moderna Museet

What to do

Mix the soil, seeds, and clay together in a bowl. Work the ingredients with your hands.

Add water gradually until the mixture holds together without crumbling. Shape the mixture into bombs about 4 cm in diameter (about the size of a golf ball). Let them dry thoroughly in the sun.

Once dried, they can be stored for a long time if kept in a cool dark and dry environment. Throw the seed bombs in neglected areas around your city. The seed bombs contain everything needed for your seed mix to grow, the clay protects the seeds and holds the ball together, and the soil provides the nutrients. When rain arrives, the ball will soften and the seeds will germinate naturally, then nature will simply take care of the rest.

Illustration: Sofia Djerf/Moderna Museet

WORKSHOP Anthotype with Turmeric

An anthotype is a sun-printed image created by using photosensitive plant pigments. Turmeric contains the curcumin, a natural pigment which reacts to sunlight, allowing you to create photographic prints using simple natural colorants and everyday materials

What you need

- Turmeric powder
- Alcohol (such as vodka)
- Watercolour paper
- Brush or foam brush
- Objects for your composition to create the printed image (leaves, flowers, sticks, small items, cut paper shapes)
- Glass or plexiglass sheet to hold the items in place
- Baking soda and water to fix the print
- Small spray bottle
- Strong Sunlight

What to do

Create your photosensitive ink by mixing 1–2 tablespoons of turmeric with 1/4 cup of alcohol. Stir well until dissolved. For a smoother ink, strain the mixture through a coffee filter.

Working in dim light, paint an even, thin layer of turmeric ink onto a sheet of watercolour paper using a brush or foam. Allow the paper to dry completely in a dark space. While it dries, gather objects for your print.

Once dry, arrange your objects on top of the painted paper to create your desired composition for the printed image. Place a sheet of glass or plexiglass over everything to hold the items in place.

Place your arrangement in strong, direct sunlight. Exposure time varies from one hour to a full day depending on the intensity of the sunlight. The print is ready when the yellow colour has faded to a pale shade, the lighter, the better.

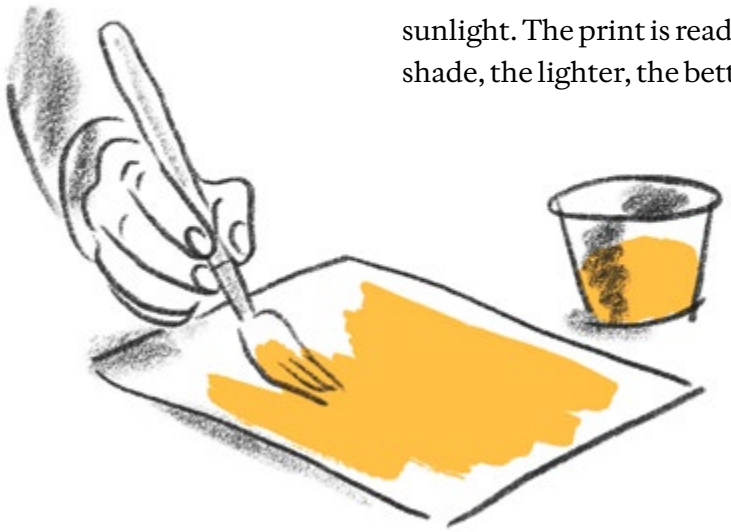

Illustration: Sofia Djerf/Moderna Museet

While the print exposes, prepare a fixing solution by dissolving 2 teaspoons of baking soda in water in a spray bottle.

When exposure is complete, move the paper away from sunlight and remove the glass and the objects. Spray your print with the baking soda solution. This fixes the image, increases contrast and changes the yellow to a warmer reddish tone.

Illustration: Sofia Djerf/Moderna Museet

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Gerðarsafn — Kópavogur Art Museum and the Nature Museum of Kópavogur

Gerðarsafn — Kópavogur Art Museum and the Nature Museum of Kópavogur

Iceland is a young and dynamic terrain, where constant disturbances reshape the land and the living world adapts in response. As an island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, it serves as a crossroad between continents for many species and is shaped by a maritime climate and persistent volcanic activity. Lava rises to the surface, forming new, sterile ground. At the same time, ever-changing glaciers retreat, revealing new terrain, while glacial outburst floods either enrich the soil with sediments or sweep everything away, leaving behind vast barren plains. The native biota is sparse in species, yet remarkably distinctive. It offers a rare window into the earliest stages of ecosystem development, where life takes hold, withdraws, and returns to newly formed ground. Human settlement is mostly by the shore and in the lowlands with a population of roughly 400.000 people. The vast wilderness of the Icelandic highlands is among the wildest in our continent and account for roughly 40% of Europe's remaining wilderness.

This unique natural context is clearly reflected in Icelandic art, both in earlier landscape traditions and in contemporary practice. Early Icelandic art focused on observing the land, its volcanic forms, open spaces, and sparse vegetation. Capturing a landscape where life exists most in its most exposed state. As the art scene developed, artists gradually shifted from depiction toward exploring processes such as change, formation, and instability. This parallels the character of Iceland's young ecosystems, where fragility, limited growth, and continual emergence define both the environment and its visual interpretation.

Art and nature

Art has always been connected to nature. The two fields are intertwined conceptually, in common ideology, material exploration and the common insatiable curiosity that drives both artistic and scientific inquiry. Throughout history, artists have drawn inspiration from nature, materializing in depictions of landscapes, scientific drawings of natural phenomena and direct engagement with the nature into land art, creating a new layer of meaning. Many contemporary artists utilize scientific frameworks in eco-artistic practice, taking on political issues through the lens of art. Art and science have through time eras marked by collaboration as well as by distance, it remains crucial to strengthen their connection, especially in an era marked by climate change and severe biodiversity loss.

To understand and explain the world, we use multiple languages, visual, sensory, artistic, and scientific. By inviting children to work across these approaches, the program aims to deepen their connection with their surroundings. Integrating nature and art, aiming to encourage holistic understanding and to equip students with tools to analyse, interpret and create meaning. Rather than setting the discipline in opposition, the interconnectedness of the two fields is brought to the forefront, allowing each discipline to benefit from the context and contrast provided by the other, showing how knowledge flows between them even when their methods differ.

Observation forms the foundation of scientific research. Like artists, scientists rely on their analytical eye when distinguishing patterns in nature. Both fields use drawing as a tool to understand forms, relationships and structures to further their research, and both aim to communicate their findings to others, whether to peers or to the broader public.

Gerðarsafn is a progressive art museum founded in honour of sculptor Gerður Helgadóttir (1928–1975). The museum presents works by Icelandic and international contemporary artists along displays on their modernist collection. Their activities reflect the museum's unique status as the only art museum in Iceland founded in honour of a female

Learning about nature through observation and creation

Eight-year-olds visiting a workshop at Gerðarsafn — Kópavogur Art Museum

artist. The exhibitions and programming reflect the legacy of Helgadóttir by exploring the avant-garde and experimentation across the modern and contemporary art scene. The museum emphasizes education and pedagogy in its approach. Through it Gerðarsafn aims to evoke interest and foster interpretation, meaning-making and creation.

Rooted in historic private collections and a long tradition of community engagement with Icelandic nature, the Nature Museum of Kópavogur has grown into a lively and accessible natural history museum where visitors explore geology, biodiversity and ecological processes through handson observation and discovery. The museum maintains a focused interdisciplinary collaboration with Gerðarsafn, where art and natural science meet in selected projects that encourage curiosity, creativity and new ways of understanding the natural world. Today, the Nature Museum stands as a dynamic institution dedicated to fostering environmental awareness and scientific understanding for audiences of all ages.

Gerðarsafn—Kópavogur Art Museum and the Nature Museum of Kópavogur collaborate closely from day to day. Each institution has its respective team of specialists in art and nature, but share a common director and collection manager, creating a special opportunity for the disciplines to meet at a foundational level. This collaboration led to a joint educational initiative, *Nature through the Lens of Art*, launched in 2023, where children are encouraged to explore the world as both artists and scientists.

Rather than focusing on a specific outcome or a finished artwork, the workshops focused on the creative process as a research method. Drawing from methods of process-based art and artistic research, the exploring of natural materials comes first, and the outcome is an unknown artwork. Using the strengths of both disciplines the program was designed to educate and inspire children in ways that were memorable, engaging, and supportive of their curiosity and creativity. Its objective was to offer clear and accessible learning about nature in the immediate surroundings, obtain compassion for nature by introducing scientific methodologies through interdisciplinary collaboration.

The first step was to bring art and nature, whether through objects or specialists from these fields, into a shared space to create a platform for dialogue. Scientists and artists lead workshops that offer diverse perspectives and deepened the exploration of each topic. Throughout the program, the children's own process of discovery remains at the centre, ensuring that all activities supported their active engagement and sense of agency in their local environment.

Developing workshops

When developing the workshops for different age groups, the National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools in Iceland served as a foundation. The guide emphasizes the importance of arts and crafts in strengthening students' social responsibility, emotional intelligence, and understanding of their connection to their surroundings nature. Through creative work, students also build critical thinking skills that prepare them for rapidly changing world. Although the workshops were planned with specific age groups, the workshops and materials can be adapted to context, age ranges and seasons.

Children exploring the organic and inorganic components of soil

Painting with natural materials

Painting with Soil

The first workshop, *Painting with Soil*, was developed with 4–5-year-olds in mind. Soil plays countless roles within Earth's ecosystems: it supports plant life, stores carbon, provides nutrients, and filters water, among many other functions. Endless facts can be shared about soil in hopes that something will resonate with children, research shows that knowing individual facts or organisms is not what truly strengthens a child's connection to nature. Instead, this connection grows through sensory experiences, emotional engagement, understanding relationships in nature, empathy, and beauty.

The workshop focused on fostering sensitivity to the material world, aiming to create opportunities for children to sense, observe, and interpret the natural elements around them, and to reflect on their purpose. Visual art was used as a tool to support this process and highlight the importance of visual literacy in understanding environmental relationships.

Six-year-old Collectors

Developed for six-year-olds, the workshop began with an introduction to classification and how scientists use it to understand relationships and structures in nature. The and a key message was that there is no single "correct" way to classify: birds, for example, can be grouped by size, beak shape, habitat, migration distance, or many other features there is no one right answer, each approach can reveal something new.

Materials were intentionally delimited so the subtle features of the subject, in our case rocks could take centre stage, encouraging close observation so children notice fine differences. They discovered that even the simplest objects hold surprising variety when examined carefully.

Through this project kids would effectively conduct their own little research by sorting, counting, sampling, and presenting data through artistic creation. By working in small groups, to develop their own systems for organising a set of rocks. Outdoors they sampled data, using frottage method to record the surfaces of rocks, bricks, and pavements. Each effectively presented their findings by creating artwork from their rubbings, adding drawings of themselves and pathways of imagined adventures.

Learning about nature through observation and creation

Eight-year-olds visiting a workshop at Gerðarsafn — Kópavogur Art Museum

Life Under the Sea

The workshop *Life Under the Sea* focused on exploring through sensory experience. The shore, our most accessible marine habitat, served as an entry point into marine discovery, introducing biodiversity of plant- and animal kingdom.

Fresh seaweed was collected each morning, and hands-on exploration was central to the workshop. Many children had never touched seaweed before and initially reacted with discomfort or even disgust, that quickly turned into curiosity as they explored its textures, temperatures, and briny scent and discovered small organisms hidden between the fronds. The artwork demonstrated how innovative it can be to use natural qualities of organic material, by using only wet algae and watercolour arranged on a paper, the polysaccharides from the wet algae adhered the seaweed to the paper as they dried.

The children were fascinated to learn how little of the ocean has been explored. Beneath the surface lies a vast, largely unknown world where light fades into darkness yet life persists in delicate and surprising forms. The ocean reminded us that mystery is not a barrier to knowledge but part of its essence.

Little Sculptors' Garden

The workshop *Little Sculptors' Garden* for eight-year-olds, introduced three-dimensional art with natural science woven into the creative process. The dynamic nature of Iceland is deeply rooted in Icelandic identity, to the degree that most participants had witnessed volcanic reaction nearby in the last years. The land is constantly changing, volcanic eruptions build structures that glaciers that carve and shape. Glaciers are a rapidly retreating natural force that may largely disappear within the next few hundred years. Together, these elements provided an ideal starting point for exploring nature as a sculptor.

To simulate subglacial volcanic reaction, children pressed stones into mineral clay to create moulds of volcanic islands, which were then cast in plaster. Through this they learned the fundamentals of negative and positive forms, as the cavities they shaped in the clay became the raised forms of their plaster islands—often with surprising results.

By stepping outside, we could observe glacier-carved valleys, volcanic mountains, and other traces of natural forces in their surroundings deepened the connection with the subject. These types of sculptures you can observe anywhere.

The children then explored the work of Gerður Helgadóttir, the pioneering abstract sculptor after whom Gerðarsafn—Art Museum is named. They identified parallels between her forms and their own creations, as well as with natural processes they had just been studying, and learned about Helgadóttir's legacy as a shaping force in the history of Icelandic visual art.

Our nature is not the same

Icelandic nature is defined by contrasts. Glaciers carve and conceal the land while volcanoes rupture it and create new terrain. The natural forces bind together the extremes of heat and cold into a landscape in constant transformation.

As an island in the North Atlantic, Iceland is defined by its exposure to oceanic currents and shifting weather systems. Storms, strong winds, and sudden changes in visibility are part of everyday experience, and the boundary between land and sea is both dynamic and sharply felt. Rivers shift their courses, coastlines erode, and new land emerges while other areas recede.

Nature in Iceland is not distant, but neither is it easily domesticated. It enters daily life through weather, light, and terrain, shaping movement, infrastructure, and habitation. For much of the winter, inhabitants live in prolonged darkness, while in summer daylight extends throughout the night, intensifying the rhythm of life. At the same time, the scale and volatility of nature maintain a degree of unpredictability. This closeness carries both familiarity and respect, as living with the environment requires constant awareness of its changing conditions.

An mould-cast adventure island

Conclusion

We live in a time of profound environmental change and rapid technological acceleration. As competition for children's time intensifies, the relationship between humans and nature has never been more important. Quiet moments once spent sitting in the grass watching insects, studying the landscape from a rock, or observing the ever-changing shapes of clouds are becoming increasingly rare. As institutions of art and science, we need to actively protect these experiences, moments that once arose effortlessly but now must be intentionally created.

The workshops were designed to highlight that these moments can exist in our immediate surroundings, without travelling far. By focusing on what exists right outside the museum, the soil, the plants, the geology of the urban environment. Nature is both accessible and abundant in their everyday environment.

Ultimately, the collaboration between the museums created a space where children could experience nature as both scientists and artists. Through close observation, sensory exploration, and creative expression, scientific knowledge and artistic interpretation became part of one continuous learning process. By strengthening this connection early on, we equip children to read their environment, understand change, and form their own meaning, by fostering curiosity, care, and a sense of belonging to the natural world that surrounds them every day.

WORKSHOP Painting with Soil

What you need

- Different soil types: sandy soil, clay, silt, peat
- Natural organic items: leaves, grasses, herbs, flowers, feathers, shells, small plants, sticks
- Natural inorganic items: stones, sand, clay, minerals, water
- Tools: paper, liquid glue or yogurt, magnifying glasses, string, stereo microscope (optional)

Painting with soil freely outdoors

What to do

1. Begin with a short, age-appropriate discussion about soil: what it is made of, how it forms, and why it matters. Talk about soil as a habitat full of life, its role in storing carbon, and how it connects to culture and everyday life. This creates a curious tone and gives children a sense of the hidden world beneath their feet.

2. Collect natural items, organic and inorganic, from the surroundings. Using magnifying glasses, children examine textures, layers, fibers, grains, and patterns. This leads to discussions about decomposition, the mixing of living and non-living material, and the natural cycles that shape soil. If you have access to a stereo microscope, let the children observe soil and sand under magnification; discovering crystals, fragments, and tiny particles often becomes a highlight of the activity.

3. Cover a table with a long sheet of paper to form a shared canvas. Mix soil with a little water and glue* to make natural paint. Explain that the artwork is temporary and process-based, more like a shared performance than a piece to keep.
   Introduce a simple story prompt, such as "We are traveling from one place to another," and encourage the children to paint their journey. They can add feathers for birds, herbs for scents, sand or gravel for texture, and straw or string to show paths or landmarks. The focus is on cooperation, imagination, and observing how nature inspires creativity.

Five-year-olds exploring soil under a microscope

WORKSHOP Six-Year-Old Collectors

What you need

- A collection of items belonging to a similar theme e.g. rocks of various shapes and sizes, twigs, leaves, sticks, caps and lids of different kinds)
- Tracing paper, pencils, coloured pencils, scissors, glue sticks, large sheets of paper (A3)

Children collecting various frottage rubbings for their artwork

What to do

1. Prepare a set of items that belong to the same category, for example, different kinds of rocks in various colours and sizes, either smooth or rough. Divide the children into small groups of 2–4 and give each group a selection of items. Their task is to discuss and decide how to sort them: by size, color, texture, material, or by categories they invent themselves. It's important that teachers support children without directing them to cultivate their imagination and intrinsic motivation. This step builds early scientific thinking, cooperation, and curiosity.

2. Children take tracing paper and pencils outside to explore textures such as bark, stone, metal, stone slabs, and walls depending on the theme. They sample a collection of various frottage rubbings, then return indoors for the art workshop.

3. To conclude their studies, they cut out their rubbings and arrange them on a larger sheet to build a personal map of their environment. They add a simple drawing of their route around the site, linking textures to real places, and draw themselves and their adventures on a scale.

A map of textures in the children's surroundings

WORKSHOP Little sculptor's garden

What you need

- Plastic sheets/paper to cover tables, empty plastic container for each student (best to re-use e.g. 1L used yoghurt tubs), clay, Vaseline, paper towels, plastic bags, stones with varied textures, acrylic paint, brushes.
- For plaster: 4 kg per of plaster per workshop, water at room temperature, Bucket for mixing, measuring cup.

Between workshops: Clay can be stored in a closed containers between sessions, with a damp paper towel to prevent drying.

Children hand-sculpting a mould by pressing rocks into clay

What to do

1. Each tub is prepared with a 5–10 cm layer of clay pressed into the bottom of the tub and coated with thin layer of Vaseline. On the middle of the table put various selection of rocks, or different shaped and textured items. Students then press stones of different shapes and sizes into their clay to create a negative of their landscape. They can also press their fingers into the clay and explore different ways of creating texture in the clay. When they have created their moulds they can og ahead and create the plaster casting of their island landscape.

2. The teacher prepares and mixes the plaster and pours in the cast. When pouring the plaster into the cast, make sure you leave space around the edges of the mould to gently pull the plaster sculpture from the clay. Note the plaster takes approximately 25 minutes to dry.

3. Take time to observe the new island! Clean off the remaining clay and Vaseline. Using acrylic paint, the children paint their island in any colour they like!

Extra note: This workshop can be done entirely outside by digging a hole in sand and pouring plaster in. Then the sand would give the sculpture texture and step three would be unnecessary.

An island cast in a clay mould

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Fondation Beyeler

Fondation Beyeler Art and Architecture in Dialogue with Nature

It is not only the art that lingers in the memory of visitors to the Fondation Beyeler, but its unique setting also leaves an enduring impression. A 20-minute tram ride from Basel to the museum, situated in the suburb of Riehen, takes the traveller beyond the city limits, past fields and farmsteads, the Lange Erlen Forest in the background and the foothills of Germany's Black Forest and the French Vosges mountains on the horizon. Riehen has retained its village-like charm, which is also reflected in the late Baroque buildings of the Berower estate that make up part of the museum grounds. Today, old and new architecture converges in the 19th century parkland. The many outlook points allow for a multitude of views of the buildings and works of art in their natural surroundings. Behind the low periphery wall to the west a scenic landscape opens out onto fields, meadows, fruit trees, waterways and grazing animals.

Fondation Beyeler, south facade, photo: Mark Niedermann

Fondation Beyeler, west wall,
photo: Mark Niedermann

Ernst and Hildy Beyeler, the founders of the museum, chose to locate the Fondation Beyeler in the village of Riehen in the early 1990s: the museum housing their collection of modern and contemporary art was not to be set up in the city of Basel, where the Beyeler gallery was located, but instead in the village on the German border where the Beyeler couple lived. The project was implemented by 1997 following extensive consultation with the local community and democratic legitimisation through a public vote.

This location sets the Fondation Beyeler apart from the usual, historic museum buildings to be found in city centres. For Ernst Beyeler, the museum's integration into the surrounding landscape was extremely important. This unique local landscape played a decisive role in his collaboration with architect Renzo Piano when developing the concept for the museum's construction. The building was designed to blend into the existing structure of the landscape, with its historic buildings and tree population, and to follow the orientation set by the walled plot. The desire to use natural light led to a glass northlight roof. In contrast to Renzo Piano's building for the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas, which was the inspiration for the Fondation Beyeler building, nature was not brought into the building through the creation of courtyards. Instead, the longitudinal building has glass facades to the north and south that open onto the park and enable a visual connection between the art inside and nature outside. A winter garden runs along the west wall, allowing visitors to enjoy the view across the landscape. In this way nature remains in its original habitat and is viewed through a different lens from the museum building.

This design reflects Ernst and Hildy Beyeler's special interest in, and commitment to, nature. The couple met as teenagers during a protest against the felling of an old lime tree in Basel's old town. Later, Ernst Beyeler founded the "Art for the Tropical Forest Foundation" (2002) and became involved in the preservation of habitats for bees—there has been a bee colony on the museum grounds since 2006.

This connection with nature is also evident in the Beyeler collection, for which the building was designed. It includes numerous landscape paintings by artists like Paul Cezanne, Vincent van Gogh and Claude Monet, as well as by contemporary artists such as Anselm Kiefer. With a view to showcasing Monet's imposing painting *Le Bassin aux nymphéas* (1917–1919), a water-lily-covered pond was created in front of the building's southern façade, thereby facilitating a direct dialogue between the painting and the landscape. For the museum itself, the collection continues to grow to include site-specific works of art for outdoor spaces. It began with Alexander Calder's large stabile *Tree* (1966, installed in 1997) and Ellsworth Kelly's sculpture *White Curves* (2001). Philippe Parreno's sound installation *Water Lillies* (2012) and Thomas Schütte's sculpture *Hase* (2013) meant that two works were added to the museum's ponds. Jenny Holzer's benches from the *Living Series* (1989, installed in 2017) allow visitors to extend their view of the landscape surrounding the museum. And since 2020, the wintery white of Fischli/Weiss's refrigerated *Snow Man* (1987/2019) has welcomed visitors all year round.

Alexander Calder, Tree, 1966,
steel and aluminium, 610 x 1070 x 520 cm
Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, Sammlung Beyeler

Ellsworth Kelly, White Curves, 2001,
polyurethane paint on aluminum , 600 x 335 x 126 cm
Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, Sammlung Beyeler
© Nachlass Ellsworth Kelly / Photo: Friedel Ammann

The exhibition history of the Fondation Beyeler regularly features exhibitions and permanent displays that have nature and landscape themes. A spectacular start was made in 1998 with the exhibition «The Magic of Trees», featuring the work *Wrapped Trees* by Christo and Jeanne-Claude. By wrapping 163 deciduous trees in delicate grey fabric, the museum grounds were transformed into a three-dimensional landscape that changed with the seasons, the time of day, and the weather. Since then, the park has been used more and more as an exhibition space for temporary installations. In 2012/13, Louise Bourgeois' giant spider sculpture *Maman* (1999) began its tour of Switzerland in Berower Park. With Olafur Eliasson's site-specific installation «LIFE», which in 2021 extended the water lily pond into the museum, the parkland increasingly became an integral part of curatorial concepts, enabling a different perception and a heightened awareness of the natural surroundings of the art at the Fondation Beyeler. For the 2024 Summer Exhibition, Fujiko Nakaya enveloped large parts of the parkland in thick fog. For the «Northern Lights» exhibition (2025/26), Jakob Kudsk Steensen's work *Boreal Dreams* (2025) intertwined the location with virtual space and research-based visions of the future, confronting ongoing climate change. Through the reflections of Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Mirror Room* (2025) and *Narcissus Garden* (1966/2025), the parkland was multiplied out into infinity.

Olafur Eliasson, Life, 2021, photos: Mark Niedermann

The Museum Park is open to locals, employees, and tourists alike; it is viewed as a recreational space, a place where nature and art come together in a completely self-evident way. Since the museum's anniversary celebration in 2007 it has become a venue for larger outdoor events, such as concerts and performances, that make the most of the scenic backdrop with its spectacular sunsets. For many years now, during the warmer half of the year, the park is used as a venue for easy access art education events, such as the Night of the Museums, summer festivals and family days out.

Summer Party in the Park, Untitled, photos: Caroline Minjolle

Summer Party in the park, children with Fujiko Nakaya's work *Untitled*, 2024, photo: Caroline Minjolle

Mobile studio “Serafin” in the park, photo: Matthias Mangold

Outdoors paint workshop during the summer party, photo: Matthias Mangold

The addition of a new museum building, designed by Swiss architect Peter Zumthor, means that the grounds are currently being expanded southward to incorporate the historic gardens of the former Iselin-Weber family estate. The previously privately-owned park, which was redesigned in the 19th century by Jean-François Caillat based on the English model, will then be opened to the public and offer a new quality of experience to visitors with its site-specific sculptures. As part of these innovations, the Fondation Beyeler is placing greater emphasis on the site as a whole and, consequently, on the interplay between the different architectural, artistic, and landscape elements. The new museum building has been planned in a way to incorporate the historical park and its tree population as far as possible. Additional planting will be carried out in areas that were previously unplanted. The planning and construction process is being accompanied by research into the needs of the flora and fauna native to the site. A newly created curatorial position (Botanical Curator) will undertake an inventory of the plants in both two parks and dedicate themselves to integrating botanical themes into the programme.

Iselin-Weber-Park, photo: Mark Niedermann

As part of this upcoming expansion, the art education programme will increasingly focus on combining an engagement with art with an engagement with nature. In this way, new specific formats are being developed that marry artistic-creative, aesthetically-exploratory and natural history-based practices. In addition to performative tours and drawing activities related to the artworks in the park, a new series of workshops focuses on the art and flora in the grounds. A mobile studio already enables individual visitors to get creative on their own terms directly in nature. In future, tours of the entire grounds and a multilingual audio guide will provide background information on the buildings and artworks, as well as on the landscape, architecture and remarkable botanical phenomena. In collaboration with local stakeholders, such as rangers, biologists and agricultural cooperatives, excursions are being developed that will explore the different aspects of the landscape surrounding the Fondation Beyeler.

Our nature is not the same

In the eyes of the world, Switzerland is a country of mountains. And in fact, most of its inhabitants view this as the region's defining natural phenomenon.

The Alps take up more than half of the country's land surface. They are located in central and southern Switzerland. However, only 11 per cent of the population lives there. For the majority, the mountains are a place for local recreation activities and outdoor sports, such as hiking and skiing. They live and work in the towns and metropolitan areas in lower-lying regions, where the landscape is characterised by a combination of agricultural land, industrial sites and residential developments. In reality, however, the Alps are another natural landscape that has been significantly altered by human activity, as evidenced by countless swaths, embankments and tunnels for road and rail transport, avalanche barriers, reservoirs and hydroelectric power stations, military bunkers, ski lifts and ski slopes. The structure and appearance of the mountains is also being affected by increasing glacier melt due to global warming.

In Basel, the Swiss Alps form a distant backdrop. The landscape of the north-western border region is shaped by the foothills of Germany's Black Forest, France's Vosges mountains and the Rhine Valley, with its bend in the river against which the city nestles. Water is key here. Polluted by the local chemical industry until the 1980s, today the water quality of the Rhine is such that salmon live in it and people can swim unconcerned. The town has over 200 drinking water fountains, many of which are used for bathing in the summer. The suburb of Riehen, where the Fondation Beyeler is located, borders a large nature reserve that serves, among other things, as a source of drinking water. One project currently underway is the rewilding (revitalisation) of a canalised waterway to increase biodiversity. This is already a reality in the chemical-free natural swimming pool, where the water is filtered exclusively by plants. Here, bathers share their experience of nature with dragonflies, frogs and herons.

WORKSHOP "The Universe of Trees"

The "Universe of Trees" workshop enables children and teenagers to engage in depth with art and nature in the museum park of the Fondation Beyeler. Using trees as an example, they learn about the museum's natural surroundings in a playful and aesthetically exploratory way, with the aim of increasing their awareness and appreciation of natural habitats. The workshop runs from April to October and lasts approximately 150 minutes including a break.

Part 1: Getting to know each other & introduction
Art and botany in the museum park

What you need

Cushions, artwork, possibly a hand puppet of an animal living in the park, such as a squirrel or an owl.

What to do

Using the sculptures in the museum park, the importance of nature—and trees in particular—to the history of the museum and its founders, Ernst and Hildy Beyeler, is explained through dialogue. A hand puppet is used to communicate with the younger children.

Children "feeding" nuts to the squirrel hand puppet, photo: Mathias Mangold

Part 2: Research
Finding and investigating trees

What you need

General map with selected trees, detailed photographs of the bark of each tree, questionnaire, clipboards, paper, wax crayons, coloured pencils, measuring tape, magnifying glasses, instant camera.

What to do

From their conversation with the hand puppet, younger children learn about two special trees in the park, the ginkgo and the Hungarian lime tree. The exploration of those trees focuses on the group experience, bodily sensations and the appreciation of the trees as living beings. The children hug the trees, and feel the structures of the different barks and leaves. They touch the roots of the trees and search for animals that live on the trunk. Holding hands, they measure the circumference of the trunk with their arms.

Teenager drawing their tree, photo: Fondation Beyeler

Older children and teenagers work more independently in small groups as “tree researchers” on one of a total of four tree species. Equipped with a questionnaire and a set of materials, they find their respective tree. They measure the circumference of the trunk, examine the structure of the bark and the insects living there with a magnifying glass, and study the shapes of the branches and foliage. They record their discoveries with wax crayons and coloured pencils using frottage and drawing techniques. With the help of the questionnaire, they create a profile of their respective tree. Portrait photos of the researchers in front of their trees help them identify further with the object they are researching. Finally, they share their findings with each other. They learn more about the four tree species they have researched and about the ecological function of trees in general.

Part 3: Creative practice

After a break, the session moves on to creative practice. Depending on the age group, the impressions gathered earlier either inspire a collaborative sculptural work or serve as material for individual designs.

Tree fairies and tree spirits

What you need

Sticks, string, scissors, pinecones, moss, fabric, paper, coloured pencils, wooden beads

What to do

The younger children draw inspiration from folklore and fairy tales about tree spirits, fairies, and trolls to build small dwellings at the base of the trees for spiritual creatures that might live in the park. Additional to natural materials provided, they gather leaves, small branches, moss, grass and stones and choose suitable spots, such as hollows and tree roots.

Tree booklet

What you need

Coloured paper, coloured pencils and felt-tip pens, glue sticks, decorative tape, scissors, erasers, hole punches

What to do

The older children and teenagers design an experimental booklet in which they record their experiences as tree researchers. This contains their photo portrait, a profile of the tree, frottages, drawings, and pictures of the artworks from the park.

At the end of the workshop, the group comes together for an appreciation of what they have built and created.

Children exploring techniques to construct little fairy homes, photo:

WORKSHOP Sketch it! in the Park

For several years now, we have been offering a special tour of our exhibitions: for 'Sketch it!', a selection of works is investigated not only using eyes, head and heart, but also various drawing materials.

This is not about copying or tracing the artworks. Rather, the art educators encourage creativity leading to individual experimentation. Anyone can take part; no previous knowledge is needed.

'Sketch it!' takes place in the park of the Fondation Beyeler during the summer months, from June to September. The natural surroundings of the museum encourage visitors not only to observe closely, but also to perceive with all their senses. Paint, brushes and other materials are there to assist.

The following programme, lasting about an hour, has proven to be particularly interesting and enriching for individual adult visitors:

Drawing the leaves of a tree, photo: Art Education Fondation Beyeler

Part 1: Introduction and short warm-up exercises
Draw what you hear

What you need
Paper (120g, long narrow strips, e.g. 10x30 cm), pencils

What to do
Inspiration can be found not only visually, but also in sounds and tones. To warm up our hands and sharpen our senses, we begin with a playful warm-up exercise: we close our eyes, concentrate on the sounds around us and capture them as lines, shapes or structures. What does birdsong look like, and what about the rustling of leaves?

Drawing the sound of moving water, photo: Art Education

Infinite lines

What you need

Paper (120 gsm, square, approx. 20 x 20 cm), graphite blocks or charcoal

What to do

A detail from our surroundings is depicted with a single continuous line. Without lifting the drawing tool from the page, the motif is shaped by the loops and crossings of that line. Graphite blocks or charcoal can create very different lines depending on the position of the hand. We experiment with the variability of these marks and reflect on the different effects.

Part 2: Deepening study
Abstraction & colour

What you need

Paper (120 and 250 gsm, A5), tracing paper, soft pencils, water-soluble coloured pencils (e.g. Neocolor II), water brush, small passe-partouts

What to do

With the help of small passe-partouts, we look for an interesting viewing point in the park and sketch it. The first piece of tracing paper is used to reduce the motif to an outline. A second sheet of tracing paper helps to partition that motif into shapes. This draft can be used to start an abstract representation of nature consisting solely of these shapes. These are then re-created and fleshed out on heavier paper using water-soluble coloured pencils. A few accent lines complete the composition. Now it is possible to create several versions in different colours. Which colours are used to convey which atmosphere?

Key questions we are asking in the network on Art and Nature in education

- What have we learned through building relationships with nature via art and art education?
- What tensions arise in this process—and what challenges and possibilities do they reveal?
- What remains unresolved in our work at the intersection of nature and art?
- What values and ethics guide us—and when do we live up to them, or fall short?
- How might our programs change if we considered nature as an equal stakeholder?
- How can we initiate change within our institutions, even when broader strategies are not yet in place?
- How do we sustain motivation when others have not yet embraced more sustainable paths?
- How can we encourage more conscious choices—such as low-impact travel or mindful resource use—among our audiences?
- How do educators maintain courage, inspiration, and hope in times of ecological crisis?
- What role can art and nature education play within systems shaped by extraction and inequality?
- How can we make a meaningful difference?
- How do we navigate power within our institutions—and whose perspectives are missing?
- In what ways might we still reinforce human-centered perspectives—and how can we move toward more relational, multispecies ways of thinking?
- How can we foster engagement and agency without overwhelming those we work with?
- How can we create genuine spaces for participation and solidarity with both human and more-than-human communities?
- How do our practices shape the ecological imagination and future thinking of our audiences?

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Fondation Beyeler, Switzerland
Gerðarsafn Museum, Iceland
The Nature Museum of Kópavogur, Iceland
Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark
Moderna Museet Malmö, Sweden
Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden
Museum Sinclair-Haus, Germany

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