

Solastalgic Cycles: Walking as a Tool for Reconnecting with the Living World

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Abstract

Adopting an auto-ethnographic research-creation methodology provides a lens to trace the evolution of the artist's environmental identity. Drawing upon personal photographic archives, machine learning, and a range of technological tools, this study delves into the nuances of environmental identity. A standout piece in the research is a poetic audiovisual installation retracing the reconnection to the living world. The process of daily walks served as the foundational starting point for this installation. The research-creation endeavor becomes an embodiment of the reconnection with the living world.

Keywords

Auto-ethnography, research-creation, environmental identity, machine learning, solastalgia, digital art, design.

In this research, the transformative journey of an artist-designer is explored through the lens of environmental identity and the visceral concept of solastalgia. Using an auto-ethnographic approach within a research-creation framework, the study focuses on a singular immersive installation created in 2023. This installation not only mirrors the artist's evolving relationship with the environment but also underscores the profound implications of such evolution in the broader context of environmental consciousness during the Anthropocene era.

Objective of the Study

This research-creation project aims to establish new forms of connection with the living world by reclaiming my environmental identity. The focus is on the aesthetic experience themed around "solastalgia" (Albrecht, 2019) [1], supported by the theorization of "ecospheric art" by Louise Boisclair (Boisclair, 2021) [2]. It seeks to define solastalgia and its connection to personal experiences that foster a

reconnection with the living world, along with an understanding of environmental identity (Clayton and Opotow, 2003) [3].

Ecospheric Art Practice

Louise Boisclair delves into what artists, who are neither environmentalists nor scientists, can contribute in the context of the current climate emergency. Artists visualize ways to tackle climate issues through creation. Boisclair believes immersing oneself in creation allows for reflection and renewal of existence. She defines ecospheric art as an art form revealing aspects related to the environment. She perceives artists exploring climate issues as engaging in a dialogue between resistance and imagination (Boisclair, 2021). Boisclair sees creation as a tool for change, where artistic propositions disrupt status quo perceptions and encourage exploration of new behaviors (Boisclair, 2021).

Solastalgia

Solastalgia is a term capturing the distress caused by environmental change in one's home environment (Albrecht, 2019). Albrecht describes it as the existential experience of negative environmental change felt as an assault on one's sense of place (Albrecht, 2019).

Environmental Identity (Clayton and Opotow, 2003)

The environmental identity refers to the emotional and cognitive connection an individual maintains with their natural environment (Clayton and Opotow, 2003). Clayton and Opotow describe it as a connection to parts of the natural environment, rooted in history, emotional experience, and cognitive beliefs. Influences on environmental identity include life experiences, education, culture, and social influences (Clayton and Opotow, 2003).

Connecting Solastalgia and Environmental Identity

The solastalgia concept shapes environmental identity. The union of these two concepts guides the creation and research in this study. The objective is to document the artist's transformation, specifically in connection with reconnection to the living world, through the lens of environmental identity.

Research Question

The main inquiry of this research is to discern how a deep exploration of solastalgia, articulated through a series of works, can induce a metamorphosis in my artist-designer stance, prompting a reconnection to my environmental identity.

Methodology

The presented research relies on a creative-research methodology. Three digital installations were crafted to delve into and enrich the understanding of ecospheric arts and refine an artistic lexicon.

Inspired by Bruneau, Burns, and Villeneuve (2007) [4], a research-creation approach sees artistic practice as a means to produce knowledge, merging creation and academic research. The artist becomes a researcher, using art as a medium to explore and understand human experiences.

The auto-ethnographic stance is an autobiographical genre that bridges personal and cultural perspectives, as outlined by several authors (Denzin, 2006; Duarte, 2007; Dyson, 2007; Ellis & Bochner, 1996, 2000, 2006; Spry, 2001) [5] [6] [7] [8] [9], with a primary focus on the insights of Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2015) [10]. It allows for profound introspection, illustrating the interplay between the artist and their environment. This method is employed to chronicle the artist's personal transformation and relationship with the living world. To gauge the impact of this approach, four criteria stemming from Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis auto-ethnography were adopted:

1- Reflective Evolution: The artist consistently reflects upon their role in the research, recording shifts via a log-book.

2- Contextualization: Emphasizes the artist's environmental identity, encompassing cultural, social, and historical influences.

3- Narration: The research is framed as a personal narrative, showcasing how individual experiences can shed light on broader phenomena.

4- Ethical Engagement: Beyond a mere association with the environment, it aims to spotlight an expanded responsibility encompassing art, education, and ecology.

In essence, this methodology combines creative-research and auto-ethnography to deeply explore the relationship between the artist and the ecosphere, while producing digital installations as testimonies of this exploration.

Walking the Landscape

Driven by a deep sense of solastalgia, I embarked on a journey to actively reconnect with my environmental roots. Walking evolved from a passive act of wandering to a purposeful, creative endeavor. This transformative experience made me ponder: could walking be the bridge to rediscover my environmental identity? I started documenting my walks, capturing the landscapes I traversed with my phone or digital camera. This act wasn't about aesthetics; it was about archiving raw, unique moments of movement.

Initially, the purpose of these captures was unclear. They were authentic and unembellished. I began experimenting by processing these image fragments with machine learning, resulting in mutated, almost surreal versions of the recorded landscapes. The more I walked, the more I reconnected with the living world, regardless of the setting. Over time, I realized I wasn't merely an observer of these landscapes; I was an intrinsic part of them. Both my artistic endeavor and connection to the living world became deeply intertwined, with one enriching the other. By exploring the ties between my identity and nature, I highlighted our inherent bond with the environment.

Four months into my dedicated daily walking practice, I noticed a profound shift in my inner perspective on identity. This transformation spurred me to devise experiences that reflected this restructuring. I felt a resonance with the environment, a shared rhythm, an undeniable connection. There was an urge to reconnect with the external landscapes to decipher the ones within me. I initiated a documentation process during my walks, meticulously analyzing the surrounding nature. This method is a sensory and intuitive dive into the environment, collecting data on forms, textures, colors, sounds, and scents. Each walk became an opportunity to gather information, make observations, and capture images, all contributing to a practice journal mirroring my experience and reconnection with the living world. I used these archives to craft artworks depicting my intimate bond with nature. The resulting installations embodied a creative process rooted in a sensitive, poetic, and organic approach to the environment. This archiving practice transcended artistry, becoming a form of meditation, prompting me to slow down, observe keenly, and immerse myself in the present moment, thereby serving as a tool for creativity and reconnection.

The Artist's Transformation

Engaging in daily exploration of my relationship with the environment through "Walking the Landscape," every step becomes a stride towards reconnection, and every traversed landscape mirrors my environmental identity. This ongoing introspection in motion reflects on perceptions, emotions, and thoughts, leading me to recognize the trace left by every experience and reconsider my place in the environment. This journey deepens the narrative of my transformation, illuminating my evolving ethical commitment and repositioning in the world. One contemplative installation, echoing my reshaping environmental identity, narrates my transformation. As an artist-designer, my artistic approach has shifted from focusing merely on aesthetics to encompassing deeper sociological, philosophical, and interactive dimensions. This evolution not only impacts my art but also my pedagogical approach in graphic design, emphasizing environmental ethics, social responsibility, and sustainable design.



Figure 1. Creative process during the Hexagram art residency in Montreal. ©Respect Copyright.

The transformative power of my art has led to the exploration of new creative tools, with machine learning emerging as a valuable ally. Its ability to craft new landscapes from personal archives provides a unique means to materialize the profound sadness of solastalgia. Coupled with immersive video installations, these tools offer a deeper, experiential engagement, emphasizing that we are not separate from nature but are intrinsically part of it.

Once seen as cold and distant, these technologies, through this creative research, now present a warmer, more optimistic side. They have transitioned from mere extensions of my creative will to active partners in the artistic process. Through them, emotions, fears, and hopes regarding our changing environment are conveyed, bridging the gap between the organic reality of our world and the digital realm. This reveals a brighter potential for their future use, illustrating how they can communicate deeply human and eco-centered feelings.

Conclusion

As we navigate through over three years of a global health crisis, compounded by ongoing climate upheavals, confronting the inevitable impacts we have on nature requires sustained, proactive adaptation. These concurrent crises have undeniably reshaped both our individual and collective outlooks, urging us to re-examine perceptions, behaviors, and core values in the face of the current environmental shift. This societal pivot demands an acceptance of inevitable change, spurring innovative and sustainable visions for the future.

Amidst an abundance of literature providing quantifiable data on environmental change, I remain skeptical about its true potential to catalyze concrete action. The striking figures, as alarming as they are, often fail to resonate deeply enough to instigate sincere commitment. My unique research-creation journey has shed light on a once-obscured connection to the environment, unveiling a significant disconnect between my identity and the natural world that envelops me. This revelation emphasizes the pressing need for realignment and a renewed reconciliation with the environment, others, and oneself.

In essence, artistic creation centered on eco-thematic subjects not only transforms the artist's relationship with the living world, methods of creation, and mediums but also has profound implications for teaching methodologies. In conclusion, I now move forward with a heightened empathy for our natural world. I no longer view landscapes as mere visual spectacles. Instead, I recognize that I embody these landscapes, and will continue to do so with the intent of dispelling collective amnesia.



Figure 2. *Walking the Land* installation during the Hexagram art residency in Montreal. ©Respect Copyright.

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Author(s) Biography(ies)

Catherine D'Amours is a renowned multidisciplinary artist and a professor-researcher at the School of Design, Université du Québec à Montréal. With a profound commitment to understanding the intricate relationship between humans and their ever-evolving environment, Catherine delves deep into the complex interplay of factors and values that shape environmental identity. Driven by a passion for intertwining technology with nature, she engages with seminal concepts such as solastalgia, the ecosphere, and Earth's positive emotions. Her work aims to craft aesthetic experiences that foster a dialogue with the broader world around us. At the core of her explorations is the innovative repurposing of technologies, which are often perceived as cold and disembodied, to reconnect them with the living realm.

Beyond her artistic endeavors, Catherine's pedagogical approach is a testament to her commitment to fostering a deep-seated connection to the natural world. Her teaching philosophy is holistically designed to bridge the gap between humans and nature. Recognizing that we are not external entities observing nature but intrinsic parts of it, Catherine emphasizes the unity of life and the interconnectedness of all beings. Recently, she has developed a keen interest in biomimicry, further underscoring her continuous pursuit of understanding and emulating nature's intricate designs and processes.