Marie McEntee: The Container Art Project â Part 2

Marie McEntee and Anna-Sophie JÃ¼rgens | Series: Street Art, Science and Engagement

Abstract: In Part 1 of the Container Art Project Marie McEntee shared her thoughts on a creative arts project she had co-led which had used graffiti/mural art to enable children to be environmental communicators. In Part 2, Marie reveals how the projectâ s learning process developed the childrenâ s confidence and skills to engage with mural art. The conversation focuses on the authentic nature of the learning founded on strong relationships and a foundational view of the children as rich knowledge holders. It explores how fostering childrenâ s environmental futures, epistemic confidence and worth can develop a sense of collective responsibility and enable children to be strong environmental communicators and champions by sharing their vision for a sustainable future. Marie discusses how the project provides understanding of how to rebalance power differentials to enable children to be vibrant and valued environmental communicators and the particular role that the creative arts can play in achieving change in dominant power structures. The discussion reveals how community-based creative arts projects employing genuine grassroots approaches can address epistemic injustices that marginalise children from environmental issues of importance to them.

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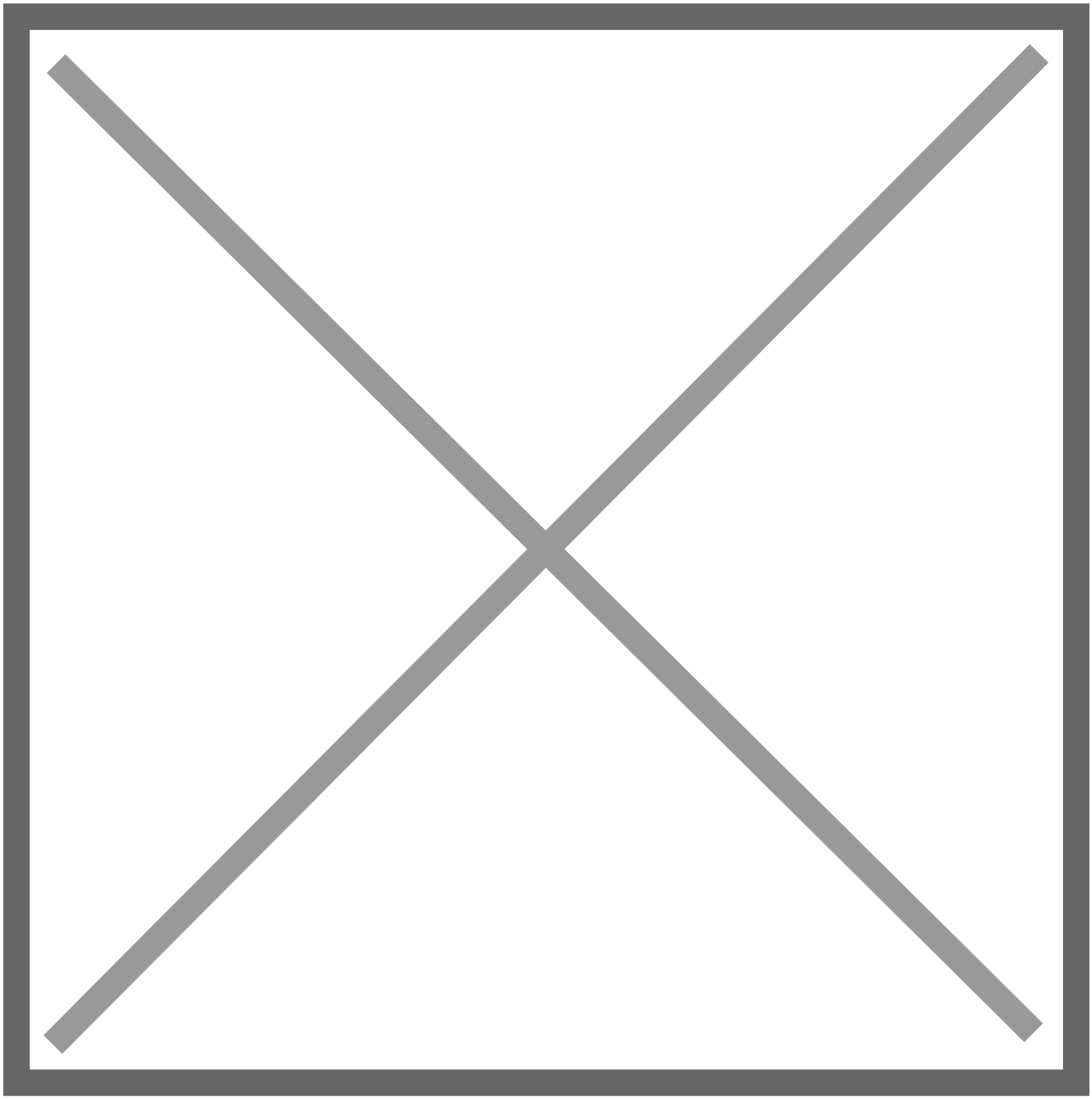
MURAL ART FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS AND THE CONTAINER ART PROJECT

This w/k series is particularly interested in unpacking and better understanding the artistic concepts behind street art and graffiti projects/works. Marie, how did the particular design of the Container Art Project come about, based on what framework(s) and why? Were any graffiti artists involved?

To create a cohesive and clear environmental message the children had to learn how to develop a shared collective narrative. Achieving this required time and space to enable them to firstly develop an understanding of how they saw themselves in relation to kauri dieback. This understanding was underpinned by the childrenâ s previous yearâ s engagement in the ToitÅ« te Ngahere project, where they had built foundational knowledge of the forest ecosystem viewed through both mÄ tauranga MÄ ori and western science (McEntee et al., 2023). However, as environmental communicators they needed to think about their story and audience. To create both space and time to allow the children to build a collective narrative, Dr Kat Thomas employed Pohatuâ s Mauri Model (Pohatu, 2011). This is built around â notions of *Mauri Moe* (the unrealised potential for change), *Mauri Oha*, (the need for change is acknowledged) and *Mauri Ora* (when change has been achieved)â .

The children needed to develop skills to be able to paint a mural on two shipping containers. Kat began by developing the childrenâ s confidence with the â muralâ artform. She taught the children to â readâ murals, firstly exploring those in their school grounds and then beyond. The children shared their thoughts about the murals by using one single word. They also used this technique later when â readingâ their own creations.



Children getting inspired by other mural art in the school. Screenshot. Container Art Project Storymap. Photo: Christina Houghton (2023).

To develop their collective decision-making, Kat tasked the children with drawing using paint sticks to encourage a less specific way of drawing, where the outline, colour and shading changed with different strokes. Spray cans were introduced and the children were invited to use these to create â placardsâ for a school drama. They also practised using spray-cans on the container by spraying outlines of their own drawings.

The children then moved to generating written material, with Kat giving them freedom to generate far more material than was needed so they were not inhibited by a limitation of space. The design wall,

where the children shared drawings, was used to celebrate the childrenâ□ s contributions to the collective narrative. Group discussions and reflection time provided opportunities to converse and reach consensus, to collaborate and co-design. A presentation to a junior class enabled the children to receive critical feedback from a prospective audience. These all fostered the childrenâ□ s sense of collective responsibility and built their confidence as environmental communicators.

As the collective narrative took shape, Kat introduced a small cardboard model of the shipping containers and the children shifted their design wall to this model using a process of collage. They then â□ readâ□ their mural which identified that they still needed to develop the muralâ□ s story.

Over a few sessions Kat worked with the children to collectively develop their story. The design wall became a central source of inspiration. They decided to show a connected natural ecosystem depicting land, water and sky. From their design wall, they identified flora and fauna and other environmental features such as an awa/river to include as important elements. These were inspired by information they had gathered about the kauri forest ecosystem and from their own imagination. One child was determined that the opening doors of one container would be the place for her emu which she had been working on for many weeks. While the New Zealand forest does not have emu, it nonetheless was important to this child. The emu became known as Myrtle to represent the impending threat of myrtle rust, a windblown tree disease causing significant environmental damage to Australiaâ□ s myrtaceae trees and also now a major threat in New Zealand.

The children also drew from their own lived experience by agreeing that a local â□ dyingâ□ kauri tree which they passed on their way to school, and which had been a common drawing in many workbooks, would be a central feature of the mural. They decided to depict different phases of the treeâ□ s life, including when it was both partially and totally dead from kauri dieback. This led the children to decide that they would present two contrasting environmental futures; a living forest and a dead forest to form a â□ dead-sideâ□ and an â□ alive-sideâ□ of the mural. An important feature of the dead-side would be the â□ kauri monstersâ□ , the childrenâ□ s artistic interpretation of the kauri dieback pathogen that had been inspired by a VR experience in one of the sessions where they had entered an animated kauri forest to view how the kauri dieback pathogen attacked the tree. The monsters were the only â□ colouredâ□ elements on the otherwise bland white and grey colour of the muralâ□ s â□ dead-sideâ□ .

To transfer the illustrations to the containers, Kat photographed, resized and placed them onto photographic images of the container itself. This created a draft map that was then traced onto the containers. It was only before this stage that an Auckland mural artist was approached for Kat to be reassured about this up-scaling process. The painting of the drawings occurred over several weeks as time and weather permitted.

> Screenshot. Container Art Project Storymap. Photo: Christina Houghton (2023).
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This entire journey was an iterative process that Kat progressed only as the children felt ready to move to the next stage. Katâ□ s confidence with using the creative arts particularly drawing, sketching and painting and her extensive experience as a youth facilitator ensured the mural was an authentic expression of the childrenâ□ s contrasting environmental visions â□ one vision where kauri dieback

was present (the bland dead-side) and one where it was not (the brightly coloured alive-side).

While Kat, I and Molly connected regularly to ensure we had the necessary material and to brainstorm the next steps, it was Katâ□ s deep commitment to child-centred learning and her genuine and honest relationship with the children, that created the necessary learning environment and kept the children motivated for the entire nine-months of this project. The childrenâ□ s subsequent reflections captured in a recorded walk-along interview around the finished container, showed that they equally valued the learning process as much as the final artwork.

> Children painting the southern dead side of the containers. Screenshot. Container Art Project Storymap. P
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To what extent was the art making inspired by research and science? And how does the Container Art Project address and enable a deeper understanding of environmental topics and the urgency to protect it?

The container art project was action research. I have been deeply influenced by Frickerâ□ s writing on epistemic injustice where identities in society, in this case children, are marginalised based on their social identity. The children felt isolated from the decision-making that saw their local neighbouring forest closed. While the decision to close the forest was justified, it nonetheless left the children feeling deeply disconnected from a forest which was important in their lives, and had been an â□ educationalâ□ haven for the school. The children wanted to understand why the forest was closed and to contribute to its ongoing management. In the ToitÅ« te Ngahere project in Year 1, we had listened to their concerns and we had connected them with the Council who managed the forest (McEntee et al., 2023). It was through this collaboration that the container art project emerged as a way for the children to contribute to the forest. The project has therefore assisted in a deeper understanding about the effect of epistemic injustice on children. It has also taught us about how authentic learning processes can rebalance power differentials.

The project shows the important role that children can play as environmental communicators. Often we see children as conduits for environmental messages to change or direct them or their parents towards pro-environmental behaviours. This project did not view the children as recipients of environmental messaging, but rather as knowledge creators and communicators. They engaged in futures thinking. A 2021 UNESCO report states how important collaborative engagement and futures thinking is for fostering just and sustainable futures. It says, â□ the future of our planet must be locally and democratically envisioned. It is only through collective and individual actions that harness our rich diversity of peoples and cultures that the futures we want can be realizedâ□ (p. vii). The container art project empowered children giving them voice and agency to contribute to the creation of a more just and sustainable society.

Does a special kind of knowledge emerge from the Container Art Project?

The container art is the voice of children, so it contains the knowledge, opinions, views and visions of 10-11year olds. It shows the world they want to live in, and the world they do not want to live in, that is a world of inaction which is colourless and full of monsters. The artwork and narrative portrays the childrenâ□ s world â□ a â□ more than human worldâ□ where there is sky, land, mountains/maunga, trees/rÄ□ kau, birds/manu, awa/rivers, factories billowing smoke, kauri monsters as

well as dreams and hope. The narrative is sophisticated showing two contrasting visions â□□ one with and one without kauri dieback. This is children engaging in futures thinking. It makes visible the invisible â□□ uncertainty, risk and inaction. Although the ecosystem is a forest, the children have extended beyond the forest to show other ecosystems â□□ the urban landscape and the oceans. This is a connected world, where effects in one landscape have consequences elsewhere. As such the children are engaging in systems thinking. They display the interconnectedness of the environment that creates vulnerabilities in the face of global environmental challenges such as climate change, ocean pollution and forest diseases.

The mural is a call to action for kauri dieback, ngahere ora/forest health and for the environment in general. The children have embodied their role as kaitiaki/ guardians and they have spoken for themselves and for the environment, and we, the wider community need to listen and act, and NOW.

The children have enacted eco-citizenship, in a child-sized way by being engaged in a local issue of importance to them and their community (Heggen et al., 2019). Their engagement is not tokenistic participation, as the work embodies their views, interpretations and opinions, and also their learning. They convey a strong message, act now or we will all have to face the consequences of non-action. Our previous focus groups with the children taught us that children of this age are very aware of the consequences of environmental inaction. They understand the burden that will fall disproportionately on them from any current inaction. As 10-11 year olds they want to be empowered to make a difference.

CONTAINER ART AND ENGAGEMENT

How has the environmentally themed project been received by the public, researchers and the community?

A complementary storymap/website which can be accessed via a QR on the containers and school gates, enables the community to learn about the childrenâ□□ s artwork and their journey. It draws people into the school grounds to find out about kauri dieback. Through the mural, the children have shared their vision for a sustainable future and supported the community to re-establish their relationship with the local forest. The community can â□□ engageâ□□ and â□□ connectâ□□ with a vulnerable ecosystem without needing to go into the forest and can understand why forest protection is needed.

The project received a New Zealand Kumara award for local placemaking that builds community connection. We attended a ceremony at the school when the children and their parents received the award. It was humbling to meet many parents who were so excited about the childrenâ□□ s involvement in the project. This event showed us the projectâ□□ s â□□ reachâ□□ .

The projectâ□□ s authentic learning was also deeply appreciated by the school, with the Kauri Park School principal writing: â□□ This was such an important and amazing opportunity for our pupils to engage in a creative project from start to finish because this never happens normally. Our school sincerely appreciates how in this project we were able to mesh the arts, MÄ□ ori knowledge and science and this has helped and expanded our kidsâ□□ confidence and depth of learning of science, which also otherwise never happensâ□□ .

We have presented the project at several conferences to audienceâ□□ s astounded by what was achieved in nine months and on a small budget. The projectâ□□ s profound impact on rebalancing

power asymmetries that marginalise the voice and agency of children in environmental matters, has led it to have wide appeal. When publishing we have sought to reach wide â non-traditionalâ science audiences, to show the impact of working with school children in a transdisciplinary relationship involving science, the creative arts and mÄ tauranga MÄ ori (McEntee et al., 2024).

The project shows how the creative arts can facilitate childrenâ s sense-making of the world. At the same time we have also challenged power structures, including science, to be more responsive to childrenâ s role in environmental communication and open to partnering with the creative arts.

Why is a painted mural an effective way to get people interested, if not engaged, in environmental issues?
There is something edgy and political about the medium of murals on walls and containers, and so it is well suited to environmental communication which typically seeks to challenge, provoke and is a call to action. Their scale and often few words gives this artform a presence. Being painted and even spray painted creates less precise drawing and so this gives the artist freedom to be bold.

For the children, the mural on a container was aligned with graffiti art and its somewhat â darkâ history. They felt part of a â socialâ movement. Afterall, itâ s not everyday you get the chance to paint two shipping containers with a collective vision about an environmental issue.

Interviews with the children showed they expressed a real enjoyment about having engaged with mural art. They valued deeply the opportunity to learn how to create a mural with a strong message. The experience had taught them to view murals with a critical eye: One child stated: â There is this mural artist on my dairy (i.e. a convenience store) and itâ s got like a skateboard on it to stop people spray painting, but it does not mean anything. They could have at least put some meaning into itâ . While another added: â Itâ s not like we just painted â itâ s meaningful. It does not matter if it looks good, it just has to have a meaningâ . Another student reinforced this sentiment further: â I think painters in the future need to think â why am I painting this, and what is the meaning?â

> Northern walls of the finished container. Screenshot: Container Art Project storymap. Photo: Christina Hou
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In which direction would you like to see community-based art making develop?
The creative arts enable creative and innovative thinking. They reach broader audiences and enable a wider range of people to be involved in research. The creative arts can assist with reducing epistemic anxiety that can act as a barrier to peopleâ s engagement in complex science. I now continually look for ways to use creative practices in my research. Recently I used purposeful games to engage communities around complex scientific issues. We used the games first and foremost to enable people to get to know each other, to work together and then to learn about the topic (Macknight et al., 2024). We have also just co-designed and published with another school a book called â Ngahere Ora: Exploring the Forest through Creative Artsâ .

Our research shows that art-based practices are particularly valuable for engaging children in environmental issues. The container art project shows that community-based art can bring communities together and challenge the power structures of local government, schools and science. The creative arts

were effective for addressing issues of epistemic injustice. I have grown to see the value of the creative arts not just for creating outputs â but as a way of knowing and doing that enables voices, in this case children, to be heard and to engage in a process of discovery about themselves, their local place, and the world.

If you could invent a community-based science, what would it be?
Community-based science or community-based social science must be community-driven. Our role as researchers is to act as partners to support and facilitate a community-driven goal, desire or change. It needs to be about authentic and inclusive grass/flax roots collaboration.

It is about building genuine and lasting relationships. This is particularly true when working with children. There must be transparency and honesty in the relationship. This is about power with, and power to, and not power over. I have a particular interest in power dynamics. The container art project was about re-balancing power differentials that had led to the childrenâ s marginalisation from environmental decision-making. It was about changing power structures. In communities power dynamics are always at play and so you must always be aware of this and work slowly and carefully. Genuine co-design, not simply consultation, is critical.

The container art project and ToitÅ« te Ngahere as a whole extends our thinking around tertiary and science/environmental â outreachâ , which is often focused on educating people to steer their behaviours to pro-environmental choices or to excite them about science through â wow scienceâ . While I recognise the value of outreach, I believe building community capability and capacity should be the focus of community-based initiatives, so that when we â finishâ a project, the community can sustain and build on the learning from the project and the relationships.

Community-based science/research should adhere to the whakataukÄ« (MÄ ori proverb) which guided the wider Mobilising for Action Programme: â Ka whÄ ngaia, ka tipu, ka puÄ waiâ â Nurture, Grow, Blossom. Community-based science projects should be about nurturing people to grow and blossom because when people are mobilised to protect environmental taonga/treasures like kauri, these taonga species will in turn be nurtured, and will continue to grow and blossom.

1000 thank-yous, Marie, for this fascinating conversation!

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Acknowledgements: I would like to especially thank the entire container art team â Kat Thomas, Kauri Park School (the children, principal, deputy, teachers and groundsman), Molly Mullen, Christina Houghton and mural artist Numa MacKenzie. The core team were 15 senior (Year 6) children and Kat whose dedication and commitment over 9 months cannot be under-stated. In addition we thank additional members of the TTN team, Mark Harvey and Ariane Craig-Smith. We acknowledge the Biological Heritage National Science Challenge in Aotearoa/New Zealand (C09X1817) for their funding of TTN and the School of Environment at the University of Auckland for additional support for the container art project.

Cover image above the text: *Container Art Project* *Storymap* (2023). Screenshot. Photo: Christina Houghton.

Tags

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