

## Creative research methods for engagement with nature, positive activism and the aesthetics of degrowth

Marta Konovalov, Jane Remm  
Estonian Academy of Arts, Tallinn, Estonia

**Keywords:** creative research methods; positive activism; degrowth aesthetics; engagement with nature; response-ability.

### Introduction

In this paper we will present six creative research methods that empower the dialogical partnership with nature and reconsider our ways of doing, in order to move towards cultural, environmental and social resilience. We will discuss how the role of creative practices can be rethought based on our own practice as a visual artist and a textile designer. Six out of nine planetary boundaries, which regulate the stability and resilience and human existence on the Earth, have been transgressed by 2023. World's biodiversity is shrinking – millions of species are at risk of extinction, diversity is decreasing, and human habitats are also deteriorating. (IPBES, 2019) In the time of multifaceted crises artists and designers among others face the questions of the meaning and impact of their practices. The collective engagement with the rest of nature (Mackay & Schmitt 2019) and emotional attachment towards both, nature and human-made objects is lacking. Therefore our patterns of thought and relations tend to be superficial, decisions are too often based on habits which are developed at the times of industrialisation. We ask how creative research methods promote our **engagement with the rest of nature** and support meaningful actions in the context of degrowth. We aim to shift the aesthetic perception toward focusing on relations, patterns that welcome change, layers of meaning and embodied relationships to be seen as possible degrowth aesthetics. We propose the notion of positive activism – initiating and conducting creative community formulation, action learning, craftivism (Greer, 2003) and gardening for hope and approachable change.

### The Garden – A Framework

We invite you to perceive the garden as a metaphor for the entire planet or your current field of practice. A gardener can be someone who takes care of a defined area – be it a design project, exhibition, or a garden plot, a mental territory, or a territory of action. Here humans are actors within a complex system of living beings (Clement, 2021). There are many other agents in the garden besides humans with whom we co-create the garden and the garden is always multiperspective. “The planetary garden protects and develops diversity with all its form, while globalization erases it in the name of market forces”. (Clement, 2021) Many of our ancestors common ways of doing, like mending, have fallen out of practice with the rise of capitalism (Taul, 2021) We resonate with the concept of degrowth – movement which criticises the current growth-oriented economy and develops sustainable alternatives (Degrowth Estonia, s.a.).

### The Gardeners’ Dialogue as Research Methodology

The methods developed in a dialogue of an artist and a designer are meant for other designers, artists, researchers and to be applied on other fields and gardens as well. One of the developed methods – Dialogue of gardeners’ – worked also as the research method.

The dialogue manifests directly – between us in co-writing and conversations, and metaphorically – in the gardener's dialogue with the garden. We curated experiences and facilitated workshops to promote dialogue and support data collection. Dialogical approach in the metaphorical sense can be applied in words as well as actions, images and objects (Figure 1), the important thing is that the counterparts

react to each other. This reminds us of our response-ability (Haraway, 2016). More generally, this method aims to support co-creation and action learning.

The methods are based on two case-studies. The artist's "Interspecies social sculpture" focuses on garden and forest as an environment for interspecies communication. The designer's practice focuses on hand stitched textile repair and initiating natural processes where textiles and clothes welcome change in their physical form and appearance. The research was carried out using a qualitative multi-method approach including both ethnographic and autoethnographic data collection (visual documentation, diary, reflections). In our approach objects were agents in facilitating dialogue and dialogue is embodied in the objects. Data was decoded to a written form and analysed using qualitative content analysis in three steps. During data analyses three categories were formed from the codes: 1) representations of nature experience, 2) textile objects and their work in process, 3) meetings and collaboration.



Figure 1. The creative practice of an artist and a designer set in a dialogue. Photo: Aurelia Minev.

## Results. The Creative Research Methods

As a result of the analysis we learned that the bond with nature is strengthened by involving people into active creative engagement with nature. Focusing and co-creation facilitated by art and design creates a connection with place, people and nature and helps to see the meaning in less. Rethinking existing knowledge can take place through creative activities in a dialogic environment. An environmentally conscious creative process is facilitated by experiential participation and considering the possibilities of the environment. The role of the artist and designer becomes the initiator and mediator of dialogic processes.

Based on this knowledge we developed six creative research methods.

- Dialogue of gardeners'
- Decomposing the resource-intensive patterns of action supports critically analysing our ways of doing and decomposing them into nourishing compost
- Ritual slowing down in the garden aims to notice and value activities that will not give immediate fruit, but help to contribute to the future flourishing.
- Exercises for interspecies co-creation
- Interweaving with the rest of nature
- Valuing the aesthetics of randomness, decay and wearing out

They work the best if combined, interwoven and influenced by each other.

On the method cards we open up on how we applied the methods in our creative practice.

## Conclusions

We propose that one of the contributions of the methods is proposing possibilities of how to not do anything new but add layers of meaning to the existing. The role of the creative practitioner shifts from being the producer to being the facilitator of the dialogue.

We the creative practitioners can become the decomposers of resource intensive patterns, agents of degrowth and positive activism. Through the methods we invite you to a dialogue.

## Acknowledgments

We wish to express our gratitude to the Estonian Cultural Ministry for funding the research project and to all our co-gardeners.

## References

Clement, G. (2021). In practice: Gilles Clément on the planetary garden. *The Architectural Review*. <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/in-practice/in-practice-gilles-clement-on-the-planetary-garden>. (Accessed 31.03.2024)

Degrowth Estonia. Mis on tasaareng. <https://tasaareng.info/mis-on-tasaareng/>. (Accessed 19.04.2023)

Greer, B. (2003). Craftivism Manifesto. <https://craftivism.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/craftivism-manifesto-2.0.pdf> (Accessed 26.03.2025)

Haraway, D. J. (2016). Staying with the Trouble – Making Kin in the Chthulucene. Duke University press. Durham and London. DOI: 10.1080/14649365.2017.1421042

IPBES. (2019). Summary for policymakers of the global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. S. Díaz, J. Settele, E. S. Brondízio E.S., H. T. Ngo, M. Guèze, J. Agard, A. Arneth, P. Balvanera, K. A. Brauman, S. H. M. Butchart, K. M. A. Chan, L. A. Garibaldi, K. Ichii, J. Liu, S. M. Subramanian, G. F. Midgley, P. Miloslavich, Z. Molnár, D. Obura, A. Pfaff, S. Polasky, A. Purvis, J. Razaque, B. Reyers, R. Roy Chowdhury, Y. J. Shin, I. J. Visseren-Hamakers, K. J. Willis, and C. N. Zayas (eds.). IPBES secretariat, Bonn, Germany. [https://files.ipbes.net/ipbes-web-public-files/inline/files/ipbes\\_global\\_assessment\\_report\\_summary\\_for\\_policymakers.pdf](https://files.ipbes.net/ipbes-web-public-files/inline/files/ipbes_global_assessment_report_summary_for_policymakers.pdf) (Accessed 08.12.2024)

Mackay, C. & Schmitt, M. (2019). Do People Who Feel Connected to Nature Do More to Protect It? A Meta-Analysis", Journal of Environmental Psychology, Volume 65, October 2019, 101323. Elsevier, 2019, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2019.101323>.

Taul, M. (2021). Parandamise tehnoloogiad 20. sajandi alguse kirjanduse ja Eesti Rahva Muuseumi kogus olevate 19. sajandist ja 20. sajandi algusest pärit linaste rahvarõivapükste näitel. University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy. Seminar work.