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Following Seals and Dogs

Experimenting with Personal Dimensions of Transformative Design

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ABSTRACT

Present eco-social crises call for transformative design practices, which include personal dimensions of transformation and self-reflection. This paper builds on ongoing discussions in participatory design about personal transformation and its impact on broader societal change. The paper presents two reflective accounts on transformative encounters with creative practices, to explore how to better understand and nurture personal transformations in participatory design. The common themes emerging from these accounts point to the importance of noticing small events that might seem subtle or mundane at first, but upon reflection, become critical in contributing to personal transformation. The paper argues that the personal dimension of transformative design plays an important role in fostering eco-social change, and that self-transformation can be nurtured by creating space for spontaneity, letting-go, shifting of perspectives and trusting into emerging elements that unfold beyond our control as designers.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Human-centred computing; • Interaction design; • Interaction design process and methods; • Participatory design;

KEYWORDS

creative practice, eco-social transformation, personal dimension, self-transformation, more-than-human

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1 INTRODUCTION: PARTICIPATORY DESIGN AND TRANSFORMATION FROM WITHIN

Across different fields ranging from sustainability science [17, 20, 28] systems change [26, 30] to design research [10, 18, 34] personal, inner dimensions of eco-social transformation are perceived to be critical to fostering the broader, collective change. For example, San-giorgi [29] argues for self-reflexivity to address power and control in design processes. Irwin [19] emphasizes the need for learning new mindsets and ways of being in the world that can lead to different ways of interacting with others, and Choi and Galloway [6] emphasized that any eco-social change must start with the self. Escobar [12] calls for pluralistic design where orientation towards the self helps to create a worldview ‘where many worlds fit’.

Yet such personal dimensions of transformations might be ambiguous and challenging to describe or measure. They take diverse forms and can evolve at different pace, within various time scales, depending on the distinct situated (local, personal, intimate) contexts. Such transformation processes can be very private and subjective, and hence seemingly opaque, anecdotal or even absurd experiences that might be difficult to articulate, make visible or rationalize to others [25, 27, 35]. While descriptive or narrative-based inquiry into inner transformation can be a powerful way to enrich our understanding and articulation of it, the difficulty of readily identifying the moment of occurrence, reasons for occurrence, and impact of self-transformation remains. Further, ongoing problematization of autoethnography as a research methodology especially for its self-reflective, anecdotal nature highlights the deeply entrenched epistemological bias in the Western scholarly tradition that favors measurable, criteriological approaches [11, 27, 32].

Participatory design (PD) and creative practices in general are well positioned to facilitate transformative processes by creating flexible spaces to individually and collectively address questions around eco-social change in experiential ways [9, 23]. Indeed, one of the key strengths of PD is its transformative capacity and ability to provide space for different (more-than-human) stakeholders to come together as co-learners, in co-creative and care-full ways [4, 5, 24, 29]. In order to better understand the unique transformative potential of PD, it is necessary to consider how the fostering of caring relations and interactions between people and other-than-human beings, as well as more internal, personal changes take place. Exploring different ways of and attempts to render visible such personal transformations in PD will help us meaningfully engage with these issues and consider new ways to articulate and design for self-transformative possibilities.

In this exploratory paper we contribute to the existing discussions on personal transformation in PD by reflecting on two experimental cases developed within an ongoing 3-years research project [7] exploring the transformative potential of creative practice. Through our two cases, each looked through the eyes of one of the authors of this paper, we point to the importance of small events that might seem too subtle or mundane at first but that, upon reflection, become a trigger or crucial element of personal transformation; revealing a host of previously unnoticed perspectives, emotions, and more-than-human entanglements. By examining these personal self-reflective accounts from our perspective of PD practitioners, we seek to better understand how we can be more attentive to and nurture personal transformations that occur in the implicit, subjective, and private inner worlds as part of a design process.

2 TWO EXPERIMENTS: TVÄRMINNE AND BOHEMIAN DRIFTING

We present two accounts, led by two authors of this paper, reflecting on participating in two experimental creative works exploring the human-nature relationships, with aims to contribute to eco-social transformation. The reflective accounts have been edited by all authors of this paper, who work together as researchers in a larger internationally-funded project. Each account first briefly describes the scope of the experimental work, including its transformative agendas and participatory aspects, followed by the authors' personal accounts as participants.

2.1 Tvärminne - Baltic Sea Co-dwellers

The first experiment brought together creative practitioners, design researchers, and natural scientists for a two-day gathering at the Tvärminne Zoological Station in Southern Finland to explore local ecosystems and discuss diverse approaches to sea-health care. The experiment was part of an ongoing series of co-creative events aiming to advance ocean literacy and, more broadly, to promote eco-social transformation [8]. One of the authors participated in the gathering to observe and document the experimental processes.

The program involved learning about the zoological station and the local Baltic Sea ecosystem, as well as direct engagement with the surroundings, including swimming, diving, and collecting algae samples, as an endeavor to co-create embodied connections to the ecosystem. These actions were complemented with a panel discussion by creative practitioners from around the world to discuss their work in sea health and related literacy. We also engaged in reflective sessions and experimented with various prompting artifacts and activities (figures 1, 2) including the ECOTarot cards [21] – a creative card deck designed to encourage participants to reflect on their relationship with nature.

2.1.1 Playing with identities. One of the participants, a creative practitioner who, through his work, examines narratives of identity and belonging, shared a tale of a mythological creature called *Selkie*, which is both a human and a seal. During the full moon, Selkies shed their skin and come up to dance on sea shores. By leaving their skin behind, they are able to transform into another being. If a human finds and takes the shed skin, Selkie cannot return to the ocean and float calmly anymore. To the artist, Selkies shedding their



Figure 1: The aesthetic and material layout of the ECOTarot experimentation.



Figure 2: We also prototyped experiential elements for Ocean Confessions – an upcoming eco-ritual inviting people to reconnect with the ocean – and experimented with writing ocean confessions with seawater.

skin illustrates the risk and courage to be vulnerable and let go of something personally important, which can open up opportunities for transformation and discovery of new identities and perspectives. We learned how the artist has used this metaphor to prototype a Selkie skin ‘floating costume’ by finger-knitting objects found nearby the sea into a wearable suit. People can wear the skin to experience the calmness of floating, as if they are a Selkie.

In the collective reflection, the Selkie story was often repeated. We discussed the experiences of diving and floating, and saw them as openings to explorations of our surroundings without the constraints of gravity – observing the world from a shifted perspective and an embodied experience of ‘feeling like a seal’. Part of the group then indeed went to dive in the sea. As one participant described: “learning to move differently with a diving gear. . . The whole experience of diving felt like an animal experience. Even afterwards laying on the rocks, I felt like a seal warming my fur.” Others who stayed on the solid ground gathered algae samples, studied tiny



Figure 3: Human conversations on the island surrounded with diving ‘skins’.



Figure 4: Seals or humans?

bubbles in the gut weed, and the blue mussels captured with bladder rack samples. Some of us layed on the rock, to sense, with mind and body, the connections of being grounded on the earth with the sky above and surrounded with water (Figures 3, 4).

2.1.2 Random encounters and unplanned connections. Over the two days, we photographed different encounters and our eyes were guided by others’ actions. These shifts of viewpoints sensitized our reflections and we were eager to hear others’ thoughts and ways of connecting with the water and nature. We shared our concerns on global warming, shifted angles through different viewpoints, children, their parents, educators, marine biologists, students with different backgrounds. Participating in these joint activities was a thought-provoking experience to all of us. One of the participants wrote: “I have been deeply touched by this short interaction with new minds. . .Coming together to explore and deepen the bonds that connect us. As practitioners and people, co-dwellers of this earth.” The flow of impressions influenced by the activities, personal reflections and diversity of input were shared by many of us.

Some had weird dreams, one confessed to have laid on the peer to ‘let all the thoughts pass through and reconcile connections, being almost worried not to go for a swim so that the connections would not disappear.’ Another revealed how seeing one’s own research through the other’s eyes helped to understand the significance and shortcomings of their own expertise. In the natural sciences, for example, focusing on quantitative data produces useful information about the environmental state and crises (such as the melting of glaciers) but ignores people’s experiences and emotions of these same phenomena. The aquatic science researcher repeatedly shared her insight that the way creative practitioners perceive the environment and express their own experiences, observations and feelings opened up a whole new way for her to look at her own research environment, traditions and methods: “You can actually meet the people and talk to them, and see how they connect to the sea. . .For the first time, I feel like there’s some importance to what I feel, and what I’m telling about these things, and somebody is actually listening to me.”

Full moon by the sea shore brought the dancing Selkie back as a reminder of the gathering and the strong individual and collective experience. It reminds us of the personal confessions written to the rock by the sea in Tvärminne, the embodied connection with the earth and the sea, the imagined feeling of the selkie skin that transforms a human to a more-than-human creature. The insights created a new or renewed respect, sensitivity to and caring for the sea. For us, to whom the local sea and environment are familiar and dear from before, the gathering opened yet deeper connections and a relationship connecting experiencing and knowing. As an act of care, we started to collect pieces of glass and other discarded artefacts from the sea shores on a regular basis. To pass on the personal transformative experience, we have repeated the story of the Selkie over and over with friends and relatives, spiced with learned facts about algae, the disappearing flounder, blue mussels, or the changed behavior of elders and swallows, caused partially by the recovering population of the sea eagle, one of whose majestic profile we witnessed in Tvärminne several times.

The most powerful personal transformative insights relate to the gathering itself, the different parts of the puzzle, the surrounding environment, what we brought into the gathering as individuals, and how we influenced each other. What felt like random encounters with nature and other humans, stories, and different ways of making, being and knowing professionally and personally opened an unexpected space for emotional experiences and self-reflection. It offered an opportunity to acknowledge uncertainty, and instead of fearing, dive in, let go and make oneself both vulnerable and open to float in the stream of experiences, and take action towards change.

2.2 Open Forest – Bohemian Drifts

Our second case is part of an ongoing series of experimental walks in a forest area in the protected landscape area Křivoklátsko in Central Bohemia, Czech Republic, attended by one of the authors who followed a local non-human forest guide. In the series, walking is embraced as a way of becoming responsive to a place that activates modes of situated, relational participation and facilitates imaginative knowledge production [22, 33].



Figure 5: Unexpected more-than-human encounters in the forest.

Bohemian walks experiment with more-than-human navigation and are guided by Chewie (figure 5,6) – a local forest creature of canine origin who has an extensive sensorial knowledge of the Krivoklátsko forest, differing significantly from the participating researcher in physical form, way of sensing and moving, and the kinds of knowledge about the forest. Having the dog guiding the walks seemed to us as a way to gain a new, and possibly surprising or inspiring more-than-human perspective on the local forest ecosystem. In July - December 2021, we organized fifteen walks where the researcher followed Chewie without having any roadmap, trusting the dog's instincts and sense of direction. We drifted in a way that appeared, to the human researcher, without any purpose to arrive at somewhere specific – the experience of drifting through the forest was the goal in itself. Some of the drift experiences were documented in our Feral Map [13] an online interface connecting diverse, more-than-human data and stories.

2.2.1 More-than-human drifting through space and time. Walking and following the dog in such an open-ended way triggered a different perception of time for us: while we typically plan for how long our forest trips will be, this planning was beyond our control in this case. Often, we walked much longer than expected and stopped at places that were intriguing for Chewie, and that might have stayed invisible to us otherwise. We spent hours crawling through muddy river-side bushes where, as it turned out, otters and nutrias have their lairs: explorations that escalated into exciting or possibly terrifying, unexpected encounters for all of us (figure 5).

We frequently returned to the top of the local Devil's Rock, which Chewies frequently visits, and gazed into the valley, listening to the howling of the wind [14]. We laid down in a large green moss patch spread over the forest floor, realizing how soft and calming can such an experience be (figure 6). We stood under the trees with heads tilted, watching the unreachable squirrels jumping through the canopy – moments that often felt agonizingly long, challenging our own human sense of patience [15]. Nevertheless, attuning our



Figure 6: Joyful sensory-rich experience of moss, learned from the walking guide.

perception of time to the dog's created an occasion for deeper observations of the local surroundings. We noticed and learned about various movements happening in the forest that were previously unknown to us, such as the cold northern wind at the Rock top or otters swimming vigorously against the current. We had a chance to see the forest and its creatures from a different perspective, which deepened our awareness of the local environment that was already very familiar to us, as we grew up there. Through these small moments of more-than-human attunement, we had a chance to slow down and appreciate the other species we share home with.

2.2.2 On sensory capacities and shifting roles. In the middle of our third walking trip, Chewie seemed to start noticing that he can choose the direction; he began to actively adopt a *guiding* rather than a *following* mode. This shifting of roles brought our attention to the sensory aspects of our forest-walking as a more-than-human, sensory-rich experience. Chewie's senses – especially the smell that canine species use to orient themselves in the world – became key in these guided trips. Our human sensory capacities were present as well, but their usual connection to rational decision-making was put on hold to some extent. It is the dog who leads the way and makes the choice; the dog sensing a nearby squirrel becomes more important than us seeing a storm coming. This led to occasional discomforting experiences - for example, we found ourselves crawling on our four from a steep cliff, following Chewie and realizing our limited capacities as bipedal creatures; we jumped (and fell) into small river streams crossing the forest pathways and got our feet soaked in the crisp autumn-cold water; we undertook a – much longer than expected – 13km trip despite knowing that the rain is coming (it came on the sixth kilometer). These occasions, despite initially feeling discomforting, turned out to be rather refreshing and rejuvenating experiences. The sensory stimuli provided by cold water or physical exhaustion, combined with the playfulness embedded in the spontaneous drifts and breaking free from our usual calendar schedules brought about a feeling of joy and calm.

Furthermore, the serendipity embedded in our drifting sometimes muffled our space-time orientation: we thought we knew where we were, at least roughly, only to realize that we were in a



Figure 7: Observing the local landscape, attuning our senses of space and time to each other.

completely different part of the forest. This deliberate act of getting lost in space-time while following the non-human guide opened an unexpected space for self-reflection, looking *at and into ourselves* – our day-to-day life, schedules, values guiding our daily decisions – from a somewhat distant perspective. The notion of having our physical as well as creative research motion guided by Chewie – of *learning from the perspective of a dog* to unlearn our usual ways of going about a day – was strongly felt. Such self-reflective moments came with an acknowledgement of our privileged position as forest-walkers: the ability to enjoy seemingly aimless drifting through space has always been a matter of privilege, often available exclusively to the white flaneur [33]. Similarly, the sensory enjoyment of temporary discomfort is only possible because of the certainty that these sensations were only temporary, knowing that there will be fire, dry clothes, tea and some plasters at home.

Walking through the forest, overcoming obstacles, sharing moments of slow, patient observations as well as adrenaline-spiked squirrel pursuits together with Chewie created a new sense of bond between us and the canine guide. The hierarchy of human and dog-companion was distorted through these shared experiences (at least from our human perspective). The experience reminded us that we move through the forest space together, attuning our walking pace to each other, while having possibly very different sensory and cognitive experiences of what is happening around. We share experiences, observative moments, sometimes even moments of surprise (figure 7). We share these without exchanging words or having the same, or at least similar, olfactory, tactile and visual sensory capacities.

3 OBSERVATIONS FROM THE EXPERIMENTS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The two experimental works presented in this paper are vastly different in format, locations, and specific intentions. Tvärminne intentionally brought together selected participants with specific backgrounds to take part in a mixture of planned and unplanned

activities to co-create a space for collective learning and action towards improving the local sea conditions. Open Forest - Bohemian Drifts was much less structured, open to a wide range of human and other-than-human participants with an intention for experiential multi-sensory learning enabled by shifting of power and moving together through multiple worlds of a forest. However, there are some similarities too. In this section we present three main observations that emerged from our reflections on the two cases that hold particular relevance to self-transformation in PD: *letting go to invite randomness*, *trusting the emergence*, and *shifting perspectives*.

3.1 Letting go to invite randomness

Our first-hand experiences and observations from the two cases inspire us to think about how less structured PD approaches can encourage self-transformation. Open-ended approaches leaving spaces beyond the designer's control – such as drifting, allowing random pauses and spaces in the process, and inviting the unexpected – can support our sense of noticing the subtle or previously un(der)noticed elements in our ecosystems. The invitation to randomness is not uncommon in transformative design strategies that highlight the positive role of imagination, playfulness and spontaneity [1, 2]. Conscious letting go and following emergent elements in our environments ranging from personal and physical to professional can open up new opportunities to develop better sensitivity and skills to attune to our environments.

3.2 Trusting the emergence

Deliberate actions of letting go and inviting randomness call for particular internal postures, where one enters a state of presencing [1, 30] and observation, while allowing the rational and analytical mind to fall into the background. In this state one can allow things to happen at their own pace, tune in to listen and sense the 'back-talk' of the situation. While Schön [31] referred to the reflective conversation with a situation as designing, the aim here is not to alter the situation *per se*, but rather to observe and trust the emergence of the present moment.

Immersion into this kind of experiment brings forth the need to trust and be comfortable with the fact that many situations and encounters will move forward in ways we cannot know in advance. This observation is also closely linked to feral design methodologies [3] which are defined as embodied, situated, and bottom-up spontaneous experiments and ways of working with situations and issues that require relinquishing control. In the experimental design approach, similar working methods are known, in which, for example, the creative practitioner collects material samples by simply trusting that they will eventually shape into something meaningful [25]. We note that doing these requires certain privilege, as briefly outlined in section 2.2, and careful ethical considerations.

3.3 Shifting perspectives

Seeing the familiar through the eyes of another or the other is a well-known concept in PD [16]. This shifting of perspectives is what creative practices often aim at: to open opportunities for a change of viewpoints and let the experiences of others broaden one's own views. In our cases, this shifting moved beyond human-centered engagements, as we learned to listen more carefully to

other-than-human entities like sea, dogs, and trees in a forest. This provided an opportunity for us to move together in different flows of space-time and reflect on our own practices of navigating, learning, and creating from new orientation points. Such unlearning and relearning are important for imagining different futures that are more just and eco-socially sustainable.

4 CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Small, incremental changes can be crucial to large-scale transformations. Systemic change cannot happen on its own and every mindful step counts [9, 23]. Self-reflective actions that feed the sense of meaningful inner change are important: every seal-inspired dive in the sea; every forest-walk attuning us to local ecosystems, counts. This paper demonstrated how such moments experienced during PD that may be considered personal and insignificant can contribute significantly to broader eco-social transformation.

Our reflection on participating in two experiments showed how inner, personal transformations can occur in diverse situations and contexts, triggered and amplified by the elements of spontaneity, open-endedness, emergence and deliberate letting-go of our control in our various roles - for example, as designers, researchers, and humans. These elements can help us understand and raise further questions about how transformation from within may take place, and how they can be better recognized, fostered and nurtured in PD. This paper is limited by a small scope of examples, and lack of references to non-Western sources. We hope however, that the contribution provides a small step towards hopeful change.

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