

## Postscript to “‘Tears on the Flowers’: Worldwide Natural Experiments of Art Healing,” (2020), CAET, 6(1)

《花溅泪：全球各地艺术疗愈的自然实验》后记(2020年)，CAET，6(1)

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### Abstract

Three years after the publication of “‘Tears on the Flowers’: Worldwide Natural Experiments of Art Healing” at the inception of the global COVID pandemic, this Postscript reflects upon the 2020 article’s discussion of issues related to natural experiments in art-based research within the present context.

**Keywords:** natural experiments, art-based research, coronavirus, COVID 19, Internet, digital media, interdependence, formative tendency

### 摘要

《花溅泪：全球各地艺术疗愈的自然实验》一文于全球新冠疫情之初发表已经过了三年，这篇后记在当前背景下对2020年文章讨论的艺术本位研究中涉及自然实验的议题进行了反思。

**关键词:** 自然实验, 基于艺术的研究, 冠状病毒, COVID 19, 互联网, 数字媒体, 相互依存, 形成趋势

In revisiting “‘Tears on the Flowers’: Worldwide Natural Experiments of Art Healing,” written in early 2020 soon after the COVID outbreak in Wuhan, China, and before fully impacting the world community, it invites further reflection in keeping with the process of natural experiments. The unplanned artistic responses to the onset of the pandemic continue to unfold and inform the future of art-based research and my sense of the importance of natural experiments that correspond so closely to the creative process (McNiff, 1998, 2021).

### Creative Interdependence

Retrospectively, we see that Tony Zhou was prescient in calling for a special issue at the start of the pandemic in January 2020, far in advance of other journals. My focus then was empathy for Wuhan and the more recent spread to Italy, never considering that the virus would impact the entire global community and significantly alter my life, family, community, work, and country as it continues to do. As I re-examine my article, the original identification with conditions being experienced by others has been sustained through every phase of the pandemic, and Du Fu’s poem, “‘Tears on the Flowers,” has been a guide with its personification of blossoms that “feel the times.” The pure and

simple line encapsulates the suggestion of compassion for the pain of others and all life. I kept it close throughout the pandemic as part of my email signature, and it continues to heighten my sensitivity to the well-being of other people and the environments we share.

CAET was founded in 2015 to further global interdependence and cooperation, with a special focus on the present and past contributions of China and East Asia to art and human understanding, a reciprocity that is especially needed in our current era. Borders, separations, and recognition of various cultural and individual identities have a necessary place in both our personal lives and the world community. But we cannot allow an exclusive affirmation of differences to diminish common experience and what we learn from one another within an all-encompassing process of co-creation with autonomous life forces now and throughout the history of the planet that we inhabit together (McNiff, 2018). Artistic expressions are intimately attached to the persons who make them and potentially transcendent through relationships with others.

The creative process is inside and outside us. Often, the best medicine for our afflictions is to relax ego positions and empathize with other people. We learn and are inspired by what others do, now and in the past. While respecting and celebrating the integrity and uniqueness of individual and cultural artistic expressions, we can also appreciate their autonomous nature and how they transcend time and place to influence the ongoing interdependence of creation. We create with the world and never alone nor exclusively from within ourselves, even in our most isolated moments.

When I was with James Hillman beginning in the early 1980s, he would often question the origins of ideas. He approached them as images that come to us if we can see and open to them, entertain them, and create with them. Similarly, Mary Caroline Richards (1989) felt, “Ideas do not belong to people. Ideas live in the world as we do” (p. 28), and like people and nature, they are continuously transformed by contact with things outside of themselves, including us. To deny these interrelationships is to deny the creative process, and if ideas and sources of art and understanding present themselves in the world, often unseen, how does this inform our approaches to research and creation?

### **Natural Experiments and the Future of Art-based Research**

The discussion I initiated about natural, art-based experiments in the special issue of the journal, *CAET* (6:1), and how the worldwide artistic responses to the pandemic have furthered our understanding of how art acts as a healer in the most difficult times throughout human history, has taken on major significance in my work. Again, natural experiments can be defined as systematic and empirical examinations of unplanned events occurring in nature and neither initiated nor controlled by those conducting the inquiries. They come to us, and we respond. As with personal artistic expression, natural experiments involve creating with the world.

As noted in the original version of this article, the COVID pandemic, in tandem with the recent development of widely accessible digital communications and documentation, has established the conditions for what can be the most comprehensive

natural experiments in all sectors of human experience. The formative/morphic tendencies that I described in issue 6:1 are reliably creating new life from chaos and setbacks (Arnheim, 1971; Whyte, 1974; Rogers, 1978), as the pandemic continues to change our lives in many ways.

The unexpected events raise countless questions for study and research. For example, in healthcare, therapy, education, and other professions based in human contact, we might ask, what are the positive and negative outcomes regarding the primary use of digital media?

Those reluctant or uninterested in using these platforms in professional practice were forced to adopt them and establish proficiency to maintain work with others and livelihoods. The widespread usage has universally generated questions concerning the positive and negative outcomes of these new modes of relationship and expression; what has been gained and lost? The unplanned and already documented experiences of many millions of practitioners throughout the world, and those yet to formulate and communicate what they have experienced, offer unparalleled research opportunities.

More specifically, regarding artistic practice in various professional areas such education and therapy, what do the conditions of the pandemic and our responses to them offer in terms of understanding, not just what is gained and lost when exclusively relating and communicating with others through digital media, but how do these experiences further our appreciation of the specific qualities and effects of various art forms? Do some media, such as writing a poem and reading it, lend themselves to the digital context more than others? Each question contains extensive issues for further inquiry.

Experience during the pandemic and my own studies of how art heals, now and throughout history, suggest that we can best understand the nature of artistic processes by studying them in their most natural and uncontrolled conditions that correspond to the spontaneous and unpredictable formative tendencies of the creative process.

In reviewing my history with artistic inquiry over more than 50 years, I believe there is no question that the most transformative and significant outcomes have resulted from documenting and showing the results and discoveries generated by practice over extended periods of time (McNiff, 2022). The intentions and goals of what was done were often clear and designed in relation to the needs of situations, but never manipulated or significantly influenced by what can be described as controlled conditions with my own artistic exploration or work with others, nor executed based upon anything other than the needs of the people involved and/or the artworks taking shape. As I wrote in *Imagination in Action* (2015), “the best things happen,” of course influenced by our goals and intentions but never controlled by them.

There are many challenges in realizing the potential of natural experiments in today's institutions, even when allowed to operate outside restrictive structures requiring research to follow fixed formats and conceptual frameworks. In supervising art-based doctoral research, I have found that students generally need structure to protect against fragmentation and losing focus. My slogan has been *structure liberates*; it keeps us on course guarding against inevitable detours and tangents, not to mention an advisor's responsibility to help the student successfully complete the dissertation, and in a timely

manner. The research questions and/or issues together with the methods of inquiry are always planned, something that is an extension of the context of earning a doctoral degree. However, in the process of identifying a research direction, we work from what presents itself naturally within a person's current and past artistic practice. I ask, what is significant, problematic, of personal interest and in need of further understanding, methodological perfection, and of value to you and others? Artists will often want to engage in open-ended and relatively undirected expression and studio work over extended periods of time to either access a research focus or test a sense of direction, and once a plan is established, approved, and formalized, we realize that within the creative process, the most significant discoveries and outcomes often emerge contrary to intentions and preconceived objectives. Thus, we strive to be flexible, responsive, and ready to change the structure if necessary. Ultimately, the plan is a step, an initiative that may result in something much different, sometimes manifested from the process in opposition to our plans which is what art is often apt to do.

Perhaps a fundamental issue regarding the future, and I believe necessary integration of natural experiments and art-based research, is navigating the relationship between plans and the unplanned. Art-based research is distinct from science and complements it, offering a true yin and yang of inquiry. Great confusion results from attempting to scientize artistic processes using them as data for another purpose. Where controlled experiments seek predictability and the replication of outcomes under the same conditions, art is antithetical in its embrace of unpredictability and an infinite uniqueness of outcomes. Pursuing art as research requires an epistemology and methods grounded in the creative process and its formative tendencies and an openness to the unforeseen. Arguably, these processes correspond to creation in nature.

A future incorporation of natural experiments in art-based research will require a disciplined faith in the unpredictable and the often sudden and jarring ways of nature. In my view, this will move research closer to art. We can be encouraged by the reality that processes of creative imagination tend to operate spontaneously in advance of the reasoning mind, which reflects upon the outcomes and incorporates their contributions into the larger interplay of life.

## **About the Author**

Shaun McNiff is internationally recognized for furthering universal access to artistic expression as a source of creative well-being and human understanding. University Professor Emeritus at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he served as the first Editor in Chief of CAET to support East Asia's historic and current contributions to art and life. He is the recipient of numerous honors and awards for advancing art healing and research. E-Mail: [smcniff@lesley.edu](mailto:smcniff@lesley.edu)

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