

Nature Exposure

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Nature Exposure is a project delving deep into the Artists' memories of her childhood adventures in nature, using these experiences as a baseline souvenir within the work of Grace Ede. The project aimed to reconnect the artist with the natural world and her memories again as an adult, using her time in nature as a form of self-care and positive mental health reinforcement inspired by art and nature therapy. The artist attempted this through the act of walking and exploring her childhood environments, inspiring her to create new souvenirs by experimenting with journaling, photography, and natural textile creations.

The Artist exposed herself to the natural environment through a series of planned walks and reflective journaling, using the time to communicate and listen to the landscape whilst thinking about her past experiences and feelings which were brought up during the exercise. Throughout these walks, plant specimens were also collected for a series of creative experiments using different techniques such as solar printing, photograms, and eco-printing to eternalise and expose the specimens on to different materials. Throughout the final stages of the project, the artist decided to use herself as the canvas for her work to ground herself within the project, symbolising the lasting mark nature has exposed onto her throughout her life, revealing the union between herself and nature.

The outcome of this project is an exhibition titled '*Souvenir*' at Hartlepool art gallery, with the sub-theme 'Legacy'. In this sense, the term legacy relates to the memory of the artist's souvenir (her childhood memories) and how that souvenir has shaped her understanding of herself, her

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reality, and her future. The Artist is also responding to the studio 'Communication, Narrative & Experience' and is using this to link her past experiences to the project whilst also using art and walking to communicate with the natural environment.

This paper will discuss the theoretical underpinning of the above project and will explore the use of art therapy discussed in Alain de Botton and John Armstrong's seminal book *Art as therapy*, 2013. The theory of nature exposure will also be discussed with links to the work of Richard Louv and research papers that investigate the childhood relationship to the natural environment. Following this, the paper will then inspect the topic of nature exposure in relation to adulthood and the use of walking as a stress regulation strategy.

Art has been used as a form of therapy for centuries with its 'multicultural form of expression and communication' (Nicholls, 2013). Examples of this can be seen in history ranging from cave drawings made by hunters to the era of renaissance art and '*supreme human expression*' (ibid). However, the term 'Art Therapy' was only recently penned in the 1940s by British artist Adrian Hill and was used to solidify art as a therapeutic medium, starting with drawing and painting (Adelphi Psych Medicine Clinic, 2017). In an article about Hill, it is stated that '*It is evident that art fulfils a fundamental human need to create and communicate; but the value of Hill's contribution was his insight that in nourishing the mind, art could heal the body.*' (Nicholls, 2013).

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Hill was one of the great pioneers of art therapy, and it could be said that he was paving the way for a new wave of released creative expression in the form of art informed by mental health.

In the book *Art as Therapy* (2013), De Botton and Armstrong state that art *'is a therapeutic medium that can help guide, exhort and console its viewers, enabling them to become better versions of themselves'*. In their book, the pair also discuss how art can help with *'seven psychological frailties'* and how it can be used as a *'tool'* to battle them. One of these *'frailties'* (De Botton & Armstrong, 2013) is how people perceive themselves. Without art, there is no way to express yourself when words fail to explain.

With art's help, there is a tool, *'a guide to self-knowledge'*(ibid), and *'art can help us identify what is central to ourselves'* (De Botton & Armstrong, 2013). This useful tool can help artists identify with objects and places, such as the natural environment, and view it as an extension of themselves even when the language to explain isn't readily available. According to the book, the *'psychological frailties'*(ibid) are *also 'connected with looking at nature'* (Botton & Armstrong, 2013).

This statement links to the human disregard some people have for nature's significance, especially for their own experiences when it is present. However, nature is more than just a backdrop for everyday life. Nature can be a *'therapeutic force within our imaginations'* (ibid) and can be used in many ways, especially in art, such as helping to create a *'closer or more meaningful perception of nature'* (De Botton & Armstrong, 2013). This meaningful perception can also be reached

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through the act of photography, with one photographer embracing photography's therapeutic qualities.



Figure 1- Jo Spence, *The Final Project* ['End Picture' Floating], 1991 - 1992

An example of the use of nature as a therapeutic force in art is the late photographer, Jo Spence. Spence, the co-creator of Phototherapy, has been using the camera as a tool for emotional release since her breast cancer diagnosis in the 1980s and has established photography as a form of healing (Jansen, 2020). In her image (figure 1), *The Final Project* ['End Picture' Floating], Spence can be seen floating on a rocky shore as if she is exposing herself to nature as a sacrifice.

This image, along with others in her series, were used to signify her final years after her Leukaemia diagnosis in 1991 (David Company, 2016). In the final project, curated by David Company, Spence uses past self-portraits and other materials to create work that embraces death by presenting '*her own body 'returning to nature'*' (Ibid).

This return to nature in her work could be interpreted as her becoming part of the earth once her time is up and gives off a very calming and beautiful aura. It has often been said that nature therapy is an effective treatment for anxiety (Kotera et al., 2020), and Spence, at this time, will have understandably been going through an emotional and anxious period after her diagnosis. By using past images for her work, Spence is placing herself in landscapes of her past, and it could be said that she is channelling a calming connection using her photographs to take her there even when she can't be.

Stress reduction theory states that being in an unthreatening natural environment can reduce stress (Ulrich et al. 1991 cited in Kotera et al., 2020) it can also promote positive mental health and has the potential to stimulate stress regulation mechanisms. Humans can enhance their mental well-being and create long-lasting mechanisms by creating a connection with nature from a young age.

Author Richard Louv has spent the last few decades researching the connection between children and the outdoors. In his book *Last Child in the Woods* (2010), Louv talks about how the human relationship with nature is fading and uses his book to explore the increasing divide between children and the natural world and advocate nature's many

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positives. In the book, Louv discusses how nature inspires creativity in a child. He talks about how it demands visualization and full use of the senses helping to give a child freedom and fantasy far away from the adult world. It could be said that this freedom helps children relieve stress and regulate their emotions whilst building a bond with the natural world.

In his book, Louv also speaks of his own childhood adventures and how he was *'lost in wonderment'* (Louv, 2010), often climbing alone deep into the woods. Nature calmed Louv and focused him, yet it excited his senses, creating lasting memories to cherish decades later. In his book, he also mentions that multiple *'studies suggest that thoughtful exposure of youngsters to nature can even be a powerful therapy'* (ibid). It could be stated that learning these stress regulation strategies early in life can create a lasting effect on mental health, creating a lifelong bond with nature's therapeutic qualities. This theory links to the concept of nature exposure and the mental health mechanism it induces.

Nature exposure theory is a confirmation of the life-long bond created with nature. The theory suggests that *'if children learn that contact with nature is an effective way of producing positive emotions and mitigating stress, it is possible that they may come to see this behaviour as a way of regulating emotion that they practice through adolescence and adulthood'* (Thompson & Meyer, 2007 as cited in L. Snell et al., 2016). Contact with nature is a vital part of childhood, with studies showing that *'Life stress is lower among children with higher levels of nearby nature'* (L. Snell et al., 2016). This theory is present in the paper 'Nearby

Nature’, which discusses nature as a buffer of life stress among rural children (Wells & Evans, 2003).

Within this paper, Wells and Evans overview a collection of studies which discuss children’s well-being and their time spent in natural settings. Many of these studies showed that a disconnection from the natural environment negatively affected the well-being of children. This disconnection could be due to several factors stated within the study, such as unsafe natural environments, homes near dangerous roads, or urbanisations lacking green spaces.

However, many other participants still had a high degree of natural exposure, with experiments stating, *‘Children with a high degree of exposure to nature seem to be protected from the impact of life stress’*(ibid) and concluding that the buffering effect of nearby nature is *‘strongest for the most vulnerable children—those experiencing the highest levels of stressful life events.’* (Evans & Lepore, 1997, cited in Wells & Evans, 2003).

After analysing the results of this study, It could be said that the natural environment is a positive buffer for the life stress of children and could be used as a mechanism for producing positive emotions and mitigating stress. With this coping mechanism in place, children can use this regulatory technique later in life, creating a positive emotional buffer, especially in adulthood.

Recently, adult life seems to have become a blur of work and life commitments that can take a toll on the mind, with studies showing that 1 in 6 adults in England met the criteria for a common mental disorder in

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2014 (NHS Digital, 2014). An example of how stress can be combatted is again linked to the theory of nature exposure.

The paper, *The Childhood Factor*, 2007, analyses the correlation between childhood experience and adults visiting green spaces in England and Scotland between 2000-2003. The findings indicated that in adults, *'access to nature has been shown to contribute to stress relief and enhanced mental well-being'* (Bodin & Hartig, 2003, cited in Thompson et al., 2007). Studies also showed that Participants who frequently visited woodlands as children had a more positive outlook on the outdoors than those who rarely visited the outdoors. Those who did, associated nature with healthy activity, emotional engagement, and confidence to visit the spaces alone. The Studies also showed that the outdoors provided physical and emotional renewal for those in it. This further links back to the theory of nature exposure and the regulation of life stress.

It has been said that walking (and other outdoor physical activity) releases endorphins, lowering stress and improving anxiety symptoms. By being physically active, studies have shown that walking can help lower the risk of clinical depression and spending more time in nature can also help to quiet the mind (Stanners, 2022).

In her inspiring book *Wanderlust*, Rebecca Solnit states that the mind is a landscape and the only way to transverse it is by walking. It can be said that engaging with the mind during walking can take you back to memories created in that landscape. Solnit explores this with the quote, *'When you give yourself to places, they give you yourself back, the more*

one comes to know them. The more one seeds them with the invisible crop of memories and associations that will be waiting for you when you come back (Solnit, 2022). It could be said that this '*invisible crop of memories*' could sometimes be the most important part of the landscape by helping the mind roam back to happier times of child wonderment and adventure, especially when these memories provide peace.

The use of walking to call upon memories is a common practice for many people, with one photographer using this time to get closer to the memories of his late father, he claims, 'Being close to nature saved my life' (Louv, 2010). Richard Herrmann, a nature photographer, talks about the '*healing qualities of nature*' and states that his first memories within nature are from the age of four, looking at the 'shimmering water' of the tide pools whilst at the beach with his father (Louv, 2010).

Herrmann said he '*was transfixed*' by the beauty and tranquillity, stating, '*To me, the tide pool represented perfection, and calmness*' (ibid). This calmness he experienced in his childhood was a perfect remedy for his restlessness as a child, but as an adult, it was his lifeline. When Herrmann was 14, his father was killed, sending him into a spiral of pain and stress most days. In a world of drugs and other temptations, walking in nature became his only '*solace*', finding great peace when exploring the natural landscape, he could not find this anywhere else (Louv, 2010).

Being out in the natural environment can encourage all kinds of therapeutic qualities, such as stress regulation, encouraging a positive mindset and promoting emotional renewal however, just as Jo Spence placed herself into the landscape remotely (see figure one), one

psychiatrist has done this in the form of self-hypnosis to channel the calming effects of the environment.

In the book *Vitamin N: The Essential Guide to a Nature-Rich Life* (2016), Louv interviews a psychiatrist who has combatted this lack of outdoor time by using self-induced hypnotherapy (Louv, 2016). The psychiatrist does this to re-visit his childhood '*meadow memories*', which help to regulate his bouts of depression. The memories from his childhood in Michigan contain many hours of peace within the wildflower fields, by the streams and in the woods. By using these '*meadow memories*', he can once again call upon that peace of his childhood and regulate his mental health with a harmless restorative method. It may be said that this method is unconventional in the world of mental health regulating drugs and science, but studies show how vital and restorative memories '*are to a child's or an adult's resilience*' (Louv, 2016) in the battle against mental health.

Throughout this paper, nature has proven its healing powers through the use of art and outdoor exploration. This paper has shown that nature inspires creativity in a child and also provides them with an escape from the adult world (Louv, 2016) whilst providing children with the tools to build their own stress-relief mechanisms, which in turn create healthy stress regulation in adulthood. Nature has also shown therapeutic qualities through walking and hypnotherapy and helps promote positive mental health whilst also calming the mind with an '*invisible crop of memories*' (Solnit, 2022). In conclusion, this essay has shown that there is a positive link between art, nature, mental health and childhood and

that nature should be used as a buffer to life stress and mental health problems.

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