


May 2023

Volume 25 Number 2

ISBN 978-1-907549-55-7

 dx.doi.org/10.12781/978-1-907549-55-7

AI Practitioner

International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry



Appreciative Inquiry for Life: Working With Nature in a Time of Ecological Crisis

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Photo by Din van Helden

Co-publishers

**The David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry
and Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company**



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Art-Based Perceptual Ecology, a Path to Relational Dialogue Within a Multispecies Community

Bringing together the creator of art-based perceptual ecology (ABPE) and a practitioner of Appreciative Inquiry, this paper explores art-making as a mode of inquiry – a path to a multispecies and relational dialogue. Through reflections on embodied knowing and sensory experience with the land, we share how ABPE methodology might offer a richer understanding of whole systems and transformative change.

ask permission to enter the field, communicated through intentional breathwork, prayer or an offering. Exercising respect, reverence and humility, I enter. The field is home to a multispecies community – animate, sentient beings actively participating in movements of energy, nutrients or species. Corporeally embedded in this landscape, I am not an observer but an active participant acknowledging and valuing multispecies intelligence, language systems and forms of communication as equal to humans. (Lee Ann)

I open my attention and my awareness to the space. I listen in different ways, but it is not just listening, I am receiving. I am intentional in opening myself to this knowledge exchange. I evoke a sense of gratitude. (Julie)

This article is presented as a conversation between the creator of art-based perceptual ecology (ABPE – Lee Ann) and a practitioner of Appreciative Inquiry (AI – Julie) in which we explore the potential of ABPE research methodologies for enriching AI and imagine possibilities for generative dialogue that recognizes more-than-human intelligence, language systems and forms of communication, and the interconnectedness of a multispecies whole system. To distinguish our different voices in this article, you will see Julie's voice and Lee Ann's voice, as well as our shared voice.

Two perspectives on inquiry

Julie: Appreciative Inquiry is improvisational, led by curiosity; participatory, bringing all voices to the table; and generative, allowing for new connections, leading to new possibilities. AI celebrates the power of stories and metaphor to support emotive

I developed a new methodology and set of tools applicable to the natural sciences for studying environmental change.

Lee Ann

ABPE expands beyond the anthropocentric and supports inquiry in uncharted territory, guided by systematized tools and disciplined practices but with an open invitation for emergence – to explore without boundaries.

Julie

and relational ways of knowing; the constructionist principle of AI situates human interactions through language as being central to meaning-making – words create worlds.

Lee Ann: Art-based perceptual ecology's research methodologies are non-conventional, grounded in multimodal knowledge systems and sensory-based learning providing a holistic, integrative approach, with methods and tools to generate new knowledge and a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of all life. Contrary to its name, there is no need for artistic skills to engage in ABPE.

Julie: Recently I designed a series of virtual appreciative dialogues whereby faculty explored worldviews at the intersection of business education and planetary health. They created images of teaching that included offering counternarratives to human exceptionalism, Indigenous perspectives on the relationship of people and planet, and place-based experiences. Upon reflection, the images appeared to favor expertise over embodiment and made human ways of knowing central – and I recognized that my facilitation had neglected more-than-human participation.

Lee Ann: In the early 1990s, during my graduate studies in art therapy, I was introduced to art-based research methodologies (ABR) originating in the social sciences and designed to work with a human population. I recognized they had great potential for a non-human population and beyond. Simultaneously with pursuing a PhD in environmental studies, I envisioned expanding ABR methods and framing them within ecological and biological principles. I developed a new methodology and set of tools applicable to the natural sciences for studying environmental change. The evolution of this process resulted in the birth of ABPE research methodologies.

Getting to know ABPE

Julie: Drawn to methodologies that emphasize the power of inquiry, embodied and emotive ways of knowing, broad participation in meaning-making, and tools to engage with complexity, I began to explore art-based research. The principles and core dimensions of ABPE make it particularly inviting. ABPE expands beyond the anthropocentric and supports inquiry in uncharted territory, guided by systematized tools and disciplined practices but with an open invitation for emergence – to explore without boundaries.

Lee Ann: Creating and collecting data in the field, the researcher engages in art-based inquiry through a kinesthetic act of “making with the hands” in which neural connections are established and knowledge is constructed. The process and the product hold equal value. The art-making process offers a springboard

for new insights and questions to arise that had not been considered previously because the information was not yet available. The art product (data) concretizes original knowledge, and provides context and frames of reference to the phenomena being studied. The data do not offer finality, but rather a turn in the conversation that often leads to more questions than answers (Bochner & Ellis, 2003).

To practice ABPE methods, I selected places of significant beauty where dramatic ecological change might otherwise go unnoticed.
Julie

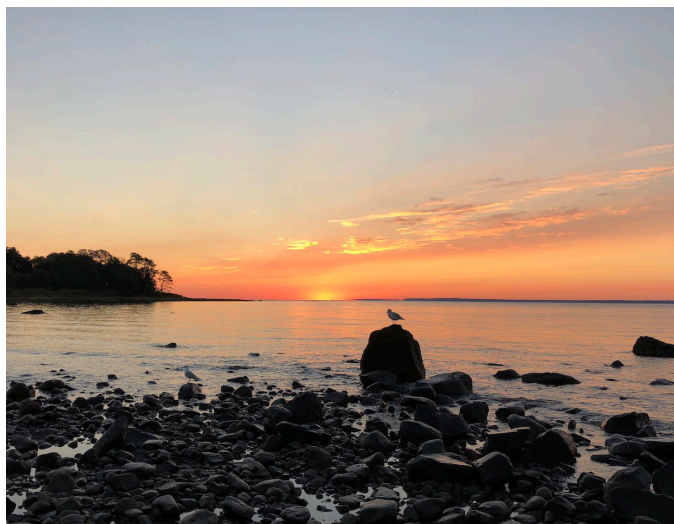
Julie: I studied ABPE protocols with Lee Ann along with a virtual cohort of educators, artists and scientists. After each lesson, I practiced the protocol in the field. It took some time to familiarize myself with the tools and process of art-making, but I gradually learned to trust in the unknown, helped by discussions with my fellow students as we shared our respective insights, struggles and aspirations for new ways of knowing within a multispecies community. In the next section, I introduce my research sites, and offer data and reflections on three ABPE protocols: Sound Map, Shadow Drawing and Deconstruction.

Art-Based Perceptual Ecology – Studying changes in ecological systems

To practice ABPE methods, I selected places of significant beauty where dramatic ecological change might otherwise go unnoticed. First, a wildlife sanctuary, a migratory flyway and intertidal zone on Long Island Sound, where a “living shoreline” project is underway to promote habitat restoration following extreme storms and sea level rise, impacts of climate change.

Long Island Sound

Images courtesy of Julie Engerran



Second is Blind Brook watershed, a natural drainage basin terminating into Long Island Sound. Overconsumption and overbuilding disrupt its natural ability to absorb

Blind Brook watershed

Images courtesy of Julie Engerran

excess water resulting in significant flooding, a topic of discussion among several local community organizations.



Sharing place: ABPE ethos with more-than-human (MtH)

Lee Ann: I yield to the idea that knowledge is relational and situated within the context of interactions between all active participants in the field. Engaged in ABPE protocols, attending to the back-and-forth dialogue with multiple species, “it is important to own my voice in this exchange” (Woolery, 2021) and to not anthropomorphize the other. One can begin this work by learning the language and communication systems of other species shared through chemical, visual and auditory signals, as evidenced in bird songs, animal tracks and pheromone marking.

Julie: As a practicing contemplative, following the principles for entering the field felt like a natural fit. I began each protocol with a sensory orientation to place. I then placed my awareness on the shared energy, a visceral connection with all beings with whom I share the space, that became more apparent through the symbiotic reciprocity of breathing.

Active listening and engagement are fundamental to the process of transformative change.

Julie

Learning to listen: ABPE acoustic ecology sound map protocol

Julie: Active listening and engagement are fundamental to the process of transformative change. I often incorporate interviews and storytelling within human dyads and small groups. From the outset, I explore concepts of deep and generous listening with participants.

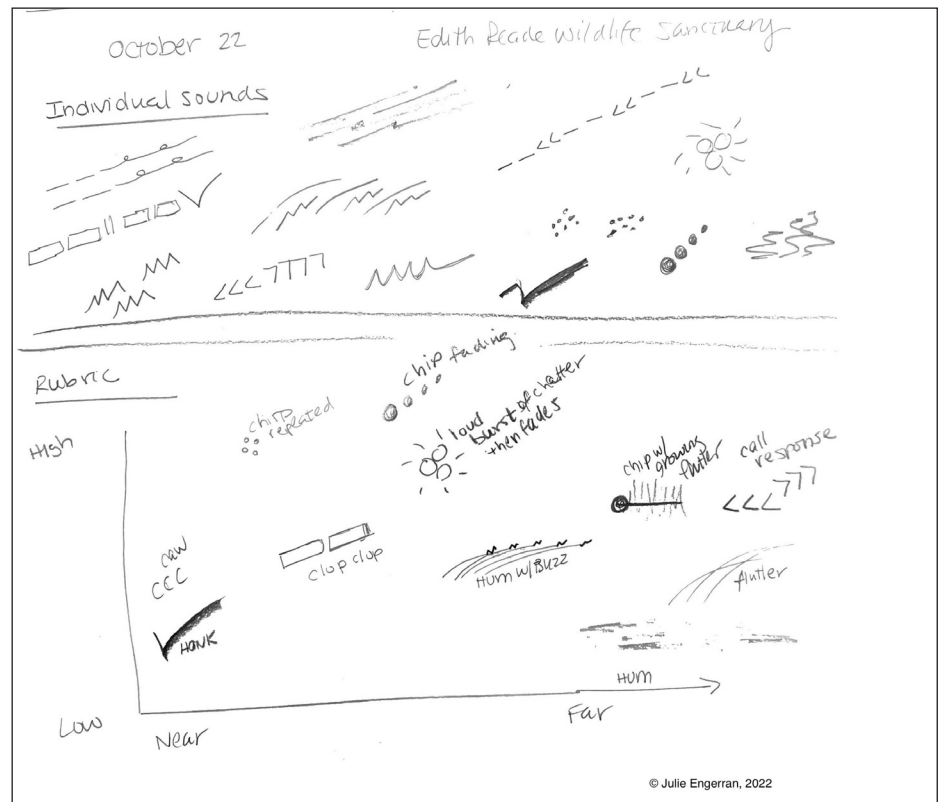
One engages a different perspective in the sound map protocol.

Lee Ann

Lee Ann: One engages a different perspective in the sound map protocol, releasing conventional assumptions and disrupting prescribed approaches to knowledge production. The researcher is asked to experience sounds in the landscape, a three-dimensional space, and translate them to a two-dimensional map; relinquishing known facts of what is making the sound, and instead focusing on sensing the nuances of vibrations in the air. Finally, the researcher translates the results of deep listening into a visual story using a symbol language (Woolery, 2006).

The researcher translates deep listening results into a visual story

Image courtesy of Julie Engerran



Neuroscientists explain the value of shifting perspectives and breaking up the smooth continuous flow that our sight-to-brain pathway offers us.

Lee Ann

Julie: Focusing on sound alone was a great starting place for me. As I made marks to document the various sounds, it reminded me of a graphic recorder documenting human dialogue, listening for and visually noting emphasis, emotion, relationships of ideas and points of difference or connection. As I created the marks – the data – the rich biodiversity of the shoreline became obvious, so much so that it was a struggle to keep track of the many distinct sounds while also capturing nuances of volume, rhythm, texture and tone.

Shifting perspectives: ABPE Shadow Drawing Protocol

Lee Ann: Neuroscientists explain the value of shifting perspectives and breaking up the smooth continuous flow that our sight-to-brain pathway offers us. In

conventional science, plant identification is learned by observing stems and branches, leaf shape and size. In the shadow drawing protocol, one shifts their focus from the plant to the plant's shadow, an action of de-familiarization. Releasing one's direct focus on the plant, looking at the familiar in unfamiliar and generative ways, provides insight whereby one can grasp abstract concepts and make broad connections between the plant and biosphere.

Julie: Tall grass has a distinctive presence within the delicate shoreline of Long Island Sound. Through shadow drawing, I attempted to understand the experience of occupying this space among rocks, waves, wind and sun. Capturing the essence of this living being through its relationships within a larger ecosystem rather than direct examination is, in some ways, like the AI practice of exploring future possibilities without putting problems or challenges themselves under the microscope.

Shadow drawing of tall grass (L)
Capturing the essence (R)
Images courtesy of Julie Engerran



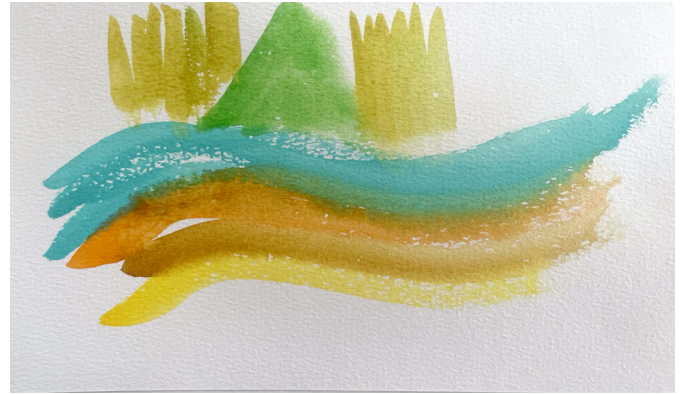
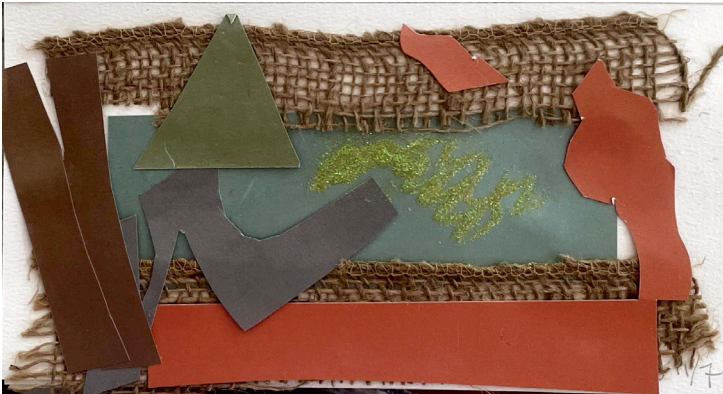
A whole greater than the sum of its parts: The ABPE deconstruction protocol

Lee Ann: The deconstruction protocol offers a subtractive method for knowing ecological phenomena by reducing, taking away, eliminating extraneous features and secondary information from one's view. Moving through a five-step generative process, the resulting art products communicate through visual language, metaphor and symbol. The art product offers tangible evidence, where one can bring in imagination to work with and manipulate the idea further, dissolving boundaries, releasing worn-out ideas and forming new connections (Woolery, 2006). These techniques of "breaking things up or down into pieces", recognition of whole and parts, and their interconnectedness come into view and can help one reach "the new and revolutionary" (Brandenburger, 2019).

Deconstruction of Blind Brook

Images courtesy of Julie Engerran

Julie: After tapping into the energy of Blind Brook, I cast a wide net of inquiry, “What can you tell me today?” (Woolery, 2021). As I went through various iterations of art-making, I became aware of the relationships of light and water. The essence of this place offered messages of continuity, from the evergreens, the tall grass, and the stagnant water by the shore, and of change, through the flowing Brook and colorful leaves in varying states of decay.



Bringing it all together – Next steps for AI and ABPE

Julie: Art-based perceptual ecology has expanded my capacity to think differently about inclusivity, whole systems and more-than-human intelligence, and to practice engaging in that paradigm. While I would like to envision an application of ABPE to ecological issues such as mitigating the flooding of Blind Brook or sustaining the living shoreline of Long Island Sound, the protocols are not plug-and-play activities, and I have not concluded how I would integrate these into group facilitation. The protocols do, however, offer a starting place for me to become further acquainted with new ways of knowing through sensing and perceiving, and art-making as an inquiry process – a first and necessary step in reimagining the role I play in shaping generative dialogues.

Lee Ann: At Citizen Artist, we are building a diverse global community trained in ABPE to mutually learn from and explore transdisciplinary approaches to scientific practice and thinking as applied to real-world issues. Over 120 students have completed our online training in the past two years. A sampling of the application of their efforts includes students in Paris engaged in the ABPE sound map protocol to explore acoustical change in an urban forest and the impact human overdevelopment has on multispecies communities. A multi-generational community of co-collaborators in Alaska administered the ABPE litmus test dress protocol (Woolery, 2023) in their local watersheds to measure aquatic health and create a platform for dialogue on the equitable practices and belief systems surrounding rights to clean drinking water. And in Wales, following investigations into ecological processes of fresh and saltwater aquatic systems, a researcher shared enthusiasm for the potential of ABPE “to open

up discussions about environments or issues that are new and/or difficult to understand” (Thomas, 2022).

In conclusion: What might be?

Appreciative Inquiry was created to enlarge the paradigm of organizing from one that favored linear, rational, logical thinking to a multifaceted approach to knowing that includes creativity of the body and spirit as well as the mind (Watkins & Cooperrider, 2000). Through methods that are non-conventional, valuing multispecies intelligence and centered on the interconnectedness of all beings, ABPE offers a way to once again enlarge the paradigm for authentic, transformative change by enhancing and enriching AI’s principle of whole system participation. We close with an invitation to you to consider how ABPE might complement your practices of inquiry individually and collectively. What are the opportunities you see?

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