



Deep Societal Innovation for Sustainability and Human Flourishing
(DSIS)

Project Workshop I Report

Arts & Methodologies; The importance of art-based practices

Environmental Research Institute, Ellen Hutchins Building, Lee Road, University College Cork

29th November 2024

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1. Key Message:

This workshop highlighted the importance of the 'different ways of seeing' element within the DSIS model, particularly through arts-based practices. The latter proved effective in opening up new perspectives, enabling participants to move beyond disciplinary boundaries and engage in more open, creative discussions.

The collective, creative nature of the activities fostered a sense of community that supports collaboration and exploratory thinking. This methodology shows strong potential for making complex, transformative theories more accessible to policy makers by presenting it in an engaging, imaginative context.

Overall, the workshop contributes to the broader effort of developing innovative, arts-informed methods for communicating research to policy audiences.

2. Introduction

The following report presents a comprehensive overview of the workshop on reimagining social institutions, focussing on the gender, religion and education strands of the DSIS project, which took place on the 29th November 2024 at the Ellen Hutchins Building (Environmental Research Institute/Sustainability Institute) at University College Cork. The workshop was part of the EPA funded Deep Societal Innovation for Sustainability and Human Flourishing (DSIS) project. It focusses on WP1 to WP3, and was organized with the primary objective of exploring how practices and perspectives from the arts can help reimagine social institutions and contribute to transcending a dualist ontology that lies at the basis of the contemporary Polycrisis. The workshop focussed on engaging participants' artistic and creative skills, fostering novel forms of collaboration, and introducing new concepts and different ways of seeing. It brought together participants from outside and inside academic circles and included students, academic researchers and policymakers from various backgrounds to engage in discussions, hands-on

activities, and artistic practices cantered around the idea of the arts as another/a different way of knowing the world.

Throughout the session(s), participants had the opportunity to engage in exercises including: somatic comparison, word-association exercises, poetry-writing, collaging, participating in group works, discussions and the sharing of experiences, all aimed at achieving a deeper understanding of how perspectives and practices from the arts can facilitate the reimagining of social institutions. This report outlines the key highlights, activities, and outcomes of the workshop, and provides reflections on its overall impact and areas for future improvement. The workshop is situated within a larger effort to create workshop methodologies that can better communicate and disseminate academic findings on transformative research to policy-makers. As such it forms one of a series of workshops in which the ‘different ways of seeing’ element of the DSIS-model, for example perspectives from the arts, or from integrative or indigenous knowledges, is used to inspire novel workshop methodologies.

3. The DSIS model for transformation

A growing body of literature views the crises that are currently facing humanity as deeply interlinked and a signal of the necessity for deep systemic and cultural change, identified as ‘The Polycrisis’ (Morin and Kern 1999; Hughes et al. 2019; Kanger and Schot 2019; Escobar 2017; Homer-Dixon et al. 2021; Dussel 2012). Nevertheless, existing narratives and models of transformation continue to focus primarily on climate change as a problem in itself, rather than as a symptom of what is a broader and deeper polycrisis, and an unsustainable societal construct. As a consequence, dominant narratives limit themselves to emphasizing isolated innovations in technology, economy, and (to a lesser extent), politics, without stressing the mutual interdependence of the aforementioned nor the need for deeper whole-of-society transformation. The model for Deep Societal Innovation for Sustainability and Human Flourishing (DSIS) aims to reframe the dominant narrative that focusses mainly on socio-technical transition by stressing the need for a deep global cultural transformation that acknowledges the interdependency of the (symptom that is

the) climate crisis with other challenges and symptoms such as economic inequality, the crisis of democratic systems, continued gender, cultural and racial hierarchies, etc.

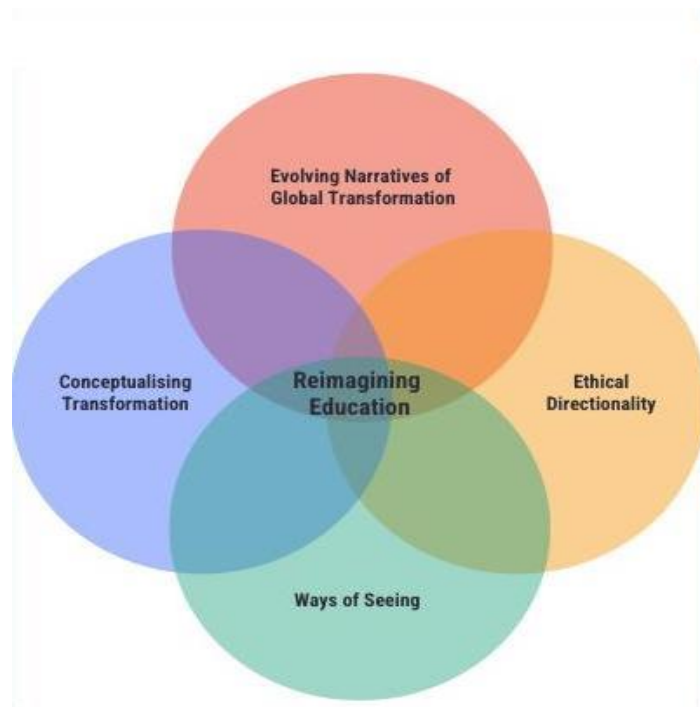


Figure 1. DSIS model for deep institutional and global transformation

Figure 1 shows the DSIS conceptual model. At the centre of the Venn diagram we find the ‘reimagining of social institutions’, which constitutes the core of societal transformation. The DSIS model focusses on six primary and intertwined social institutions: politics, technology, economy, religion, education and gender. The deep re-imagining of these institutions is informed by four further elements of the model. As evidenced by the diagram, these four elements present four ways of approaching the imagining of social institutions that overlap and influence each other.

First, the ‘evolving narratives’ component of the model emphasises the need to go beyond both socio-technical transitions and deep transitions framings to a whole-of-society transformation framing. As we shall see, the latter entails a move beyond the paradigm

of modernity and introduces us to the second component of the model: 'ways of seeing' (Dussel 2012).

Acknowledging the idea, advanced by Escobar (2004), that we currently confront modern problems for which there are no modern solutions, the evolving narratives component acknowledges that we are faced with problems that transcend the problem-solving capabilities of modern culture alone. In order to move beyond the unsustainable and exploitative practices associated with modernity, one has to think and act from an exteriority to the dominant culture and structures. (Dussel 2012, 48-49). The 'ways of seeing' element of the DSIS model aims to put into perspective the dominant epistemics by focusing on onto-epistemological plurality, transdisciplinarity, stakeholder engagement, and the inclusion of perspectives from the arts, music and literature. In other words, the model stresses the importance of exterior and subaltern perspectives for a transmodern project that aims to transcend the unsustainable and hierarchic systematics of modernity, all the while preserving its positive moments and transforming them into pluralist, horizontal and democratic cultures (Dussel, 48).

Thirdly, the model holds that 'ethical directionality' is essential to ensure transformation towards sustainability and greater human flourishing. Inspired by Sen's (2001) capabilities approach, the DSIS model underscores the need for the new narratives to be grounded in a series of capabilities/values that are considered central for human flourishing – for example the democratic values of cooperation and equality. As we shall see, the case of revolutionary assemblies shows that a radical democratic and pluralist politics entails the constant rebuttal of final objectives. Making sure to not reproduce the errors from the past, a pluralist and democratic society has to reject symbolic unification under a common denominator because, to use the words of the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (1991 4), 'the association of community with a being that is already known precludes the becoming of new and as-yet unthought ways of being.' The refusal to define a final telos, and close the totality, increases the relevance of common ethical values that, without imposing any fixed objective or destination, orient action in shared directions.

Finally, the 'conceptualising transformation' component of the DSIS model, focusses on the dynamics of transformation. Identifying qualities such as the speed, the scale and the tipping points in our search for transformative change.

4. The workshop: theoretical framework



All our education is predominantly verbal and therefore fails to accomplish what it is supposed to do. Instead of transforming children into fully developed adults, it turns out students of the natural sciences who are completely unaware of nature as the primary fact of experience. It inflicts upon the world students of the humanities who know nothing of humanity, their own or anyone else's (Huxley, 47).

The increasing use of art-based practices in the humanities points towards their ability to express a reality that traditional scientific methods seem less able to communicate. To further investigate this hypothesis, we organized a workshop in which participants were asked to express themselves through poetic practices, so to investigate whether the arts can assert/facilitate an alternative claim to truth.

The way human beings make sense of the world fundamentally goes beyond the scope of methodological knowledge. In line with the ideas of authors such as Herbert Marcuse, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Martin Heidegger, Julia Kristeva or Maurice Merleau-Ponty, our hypothesis is that the poetic communicates a reality that is of particular human importance because it is founded in the way human beings spontaneously make sense of the world. At the basis of our human experience, this hermeneutical, but subaltern, truth has the potential to counter the quantified and detached claim to objectivity of modern technoscience by reconnecting human beings to the natural and social worlds they live in. Through this workshop we hoped to investigate whether the latter can be of particular importance, not only to the humanities or social sciences and their claim to be of particular human consequence, but more broadly for finding and encouraging the emergence of meaningful narratives that reconnect people to their social and natural surroundings.

In his text: “*die Frage nach der Technik*” -the question concerning technology-, Martin Heidegger (1954) debates the question of the essence of technology and its consequences for the human being. Heidegger argues that, blinded as we are by a modern interpretation of technology that perceives the world as a resource for power to be used, we have forgotten the original meaning of the *techne*. The Greek word *techne*, “was the name not only for the activities and the skills of the craftsman, but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts” (Heidegger, 1954: 4). For the ancient Greeks the concept of *techne* could refer both to the arts, and to more practical -scientific- forms of knowledge such as medicine. Moreover, the word *techne* was also closely connected to the word *episteme*, the Greek word for knowledge and the processes of knowledge-creation (*ibid.*). On the basis of these etymological roots, Heidegger argues that in *techne* and *episteme* a similar process of *poiesis* is at work: a *her-vor-bringen*: a bringing-forth

or revealing of the world (Heidegger, 1954: 3). In other words, Heidegger points out how in ancient Greece, the arts and the sciences had in common that they all uncovered and revealed reality and consequently contributed to the creation of knowledge.

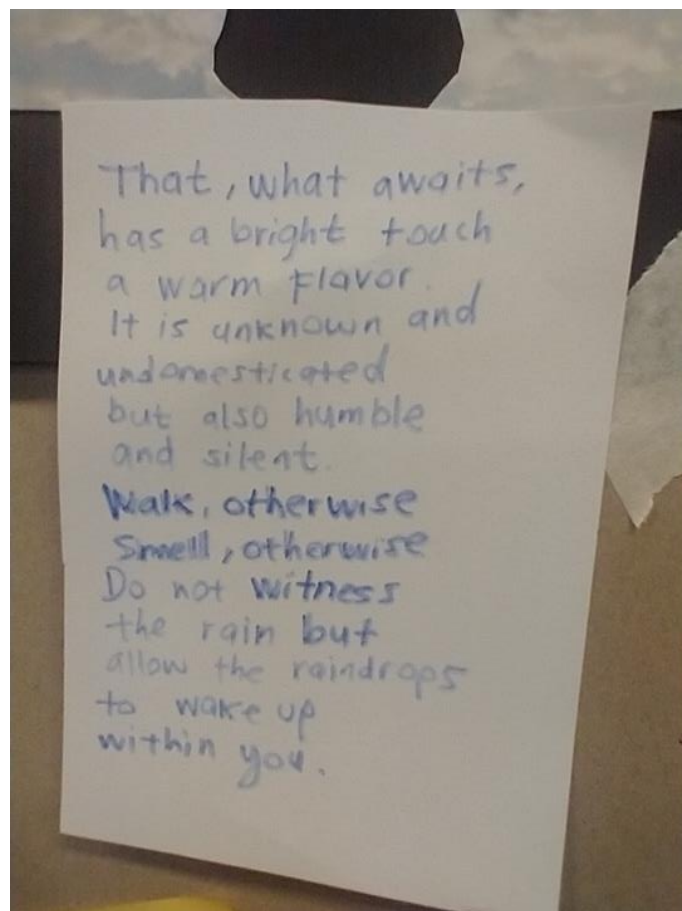
In sum, Heidegger (1954) sees the arts as an authentic, more original manner, through which the world reveals itself to the human being. He sees the poetic and the arts, because of their ancient affinity with technology, but at the same time their intrinsic difference to its contemporary expression, as a possibility of questioning the manner in which modern technology reveals the world and a possible disruptive force that can lift the veil and restore an authentic technological - in the sense of the Greek word *techne*, revealing- relation to the world.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945) studies the living relationship we have with the world through our body and argues that the poetic state corresponds to the way in which we first come to experience the world. According to Merleau-Ponty (1945: 226); the only way I, as a subjectivity, can be among things, is through my body. The objects that surround me always first coexist with me as an embodied subject, and this life of things has nothing in common with the constitution of scientific objects. According to Merleau-Ponty (1945:240) intellectual processes of signification interrupt the continual movement by which the body projects itself into things and towards others. The reflective attitude characteristic of -what can be referred to as- a vulgarized Cartesian scientific tradition, defines the body as a sum of parts without an interior, and the soul as a being entirely present to itself, i.e. without distance. Despite the fact that these definitions establish clarity within and without us, they reduce the experience of the body to a mere mechanistic process. 'An algorithm will only ever express nature without humanity' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 229).

Merleau-Ponty (1945: 194) argues that truly experiencing a situation means being actively engaged in it. In other words, living a situation, implies a mode of perception distinct from reflexive perception, a kind of meaning distinct from intellectual meaning, an intentionality that is not pure 'consciousness of something'. Here, Merleau-Ponty aligns with the poet

Paul Valéry, and argues that things never appear to us through one of our isolated senses only, but rather as the objects of a more general sensibility in which everything resonates. Seeing perception as something embodied through plural senses, shows us a different manner of experiencing unity, in which visual information can appear to us as tactile or olfactory, while sounds can for example not be dissociated from a visual aspect (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 186). Without this profound interconnection of significations, one could, for example, not understand why the sun can be happy nor the rain sad (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 194).

Because of this multidimensionality of our perception, our body, and the way we come to know the world through it, are always subject to an original ambiguity (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). Hence the comparison Merleau-Ponty draws between the body as the foundation for phenomenological perception and the work of art (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 187). In a painting or a music piece, the content or the idea cannot be communicated in any other



way than through the colors or sounds that compose it. Similarly, the complexity and ambiguity of how we perceive through our body cannot be brought back to the identity of words and concepts. In the case of the body and the work of art, expression cannot be distinguished from the expressed, and meaning is only accessible through direct contact. In other words, the way we perceive the world cannot be put fully into words because the latter remove a 'thickness' and complexity from the way we first experience it. Intellectual processes of signification interrupt the continual movement by which the body projects itself into things and towards others. This is why it is crucial to keep in mind that while the body might not be a vague object for our thinking processes, the first experience we have of it takes place in the ambiguity of experience. As a consequence, ambiguity is essential to the human existence. What we live and feel has multiple meanings which cannot be represented in the unified symbolized meanings of verbal language.

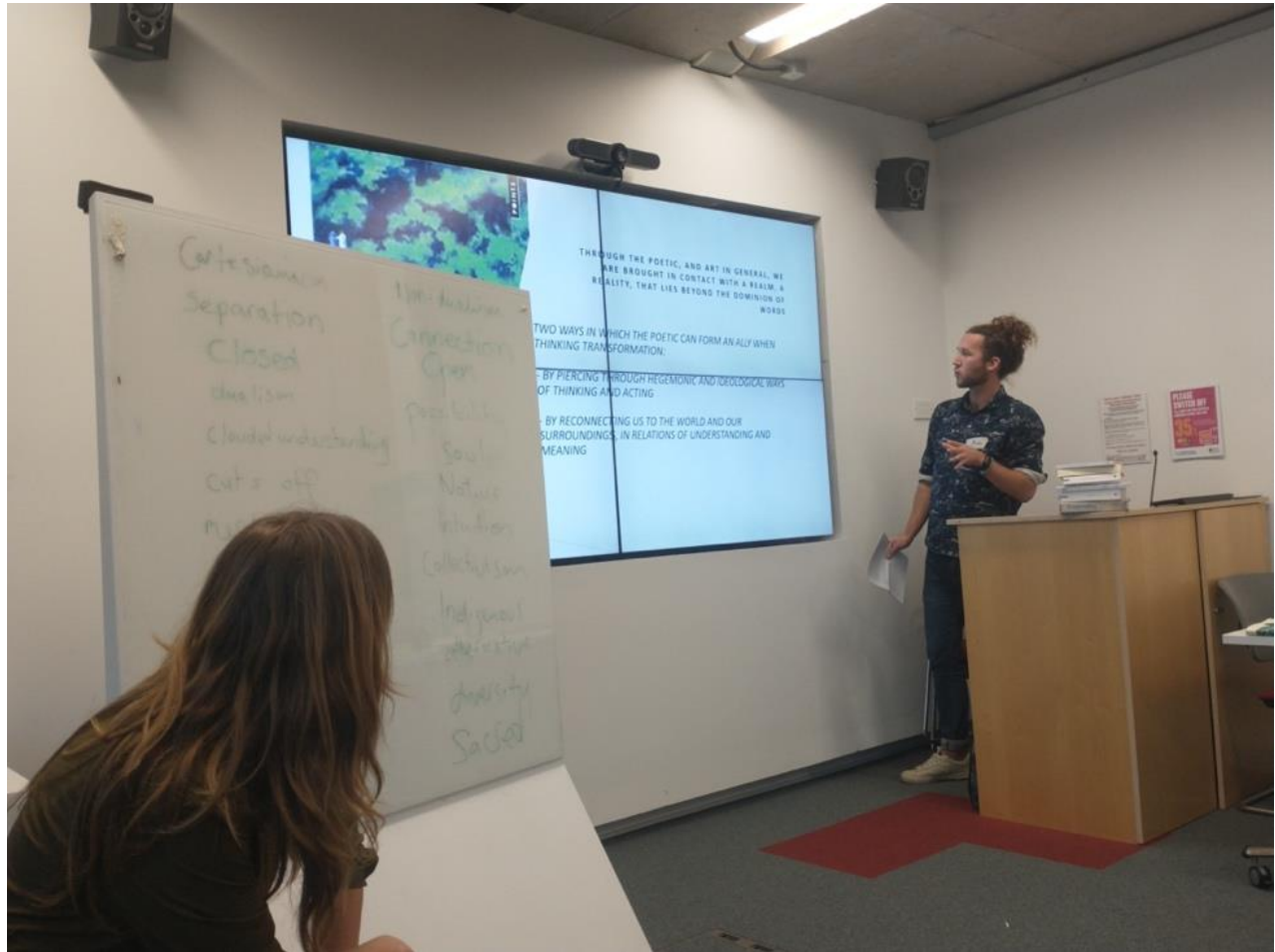
According to Kristeva, the experience of poets, more specifically: the *avant-garde*, and of authors such as Mallarmé, demonstrates the possibility of a signifying process that is different from that of unifying conceptual thought (Kristeva, 1974: 166). This signifying process recognizes the plurality of the semantic and the repression that is operated every time that it is fixed in permanent symbolic structures. Kristeva shows for example, how the poetry of Mallarmé, shatters conceptual unity into rhymes, logical distortions and syntactic inventions that record, through the symbolic, the overstepping of the limit it imposes. The aim of this new signifying process, which she refers to as 'text', is the possibility of keeping the heterogeneous moment, in which the plurality of our semantic pulsions reject the established symbolic, open. To introduce the struggle of *significance*/signifying into the objective process of science, technology and social relations (Kristeva, 1974: 187). 'In poetry, the subject exists, but as absent' (Kristeva, 1974: 193).

A stylistic device that exemplifies the processes described by Kristeva is the metaphor. Kristeva (1974: 231-233) explains how this particular stylistic device questions the function of the sign once the latter has been established. The relevance of the metaphor does not lie in the unique hidden significance that can be discovered, in other words not

in its symbolic value, but rather in the plurality of significations and pulsional operations that determine and transcend the lexeme. The metaphor, just like the work of art, takes its strength from its ambiguity, from the excess of signification that exceeds the symbolic unification (Kristeva, 1974: 233; Gadamer, 1976). Another example of how Kristeva's idea of 'text' exceeds the signifying processes of unifying conceptual thought, while saving it from utter chaos, is through the use of rhythmic and repetitive sounds that provide a minimum of structure to an otherwise senseless writing. According to Kristeva, in Mallarmé's prose, the removal of various syntactic constituents is compensated by the repetition of phonemes or phonic groups that replace the agrammatic or disrupted proposition with a rhythm, a semiotic device, which functions as a new semiotic unit (Kristeva, 1974: 218-219). The outcome of these revolutionary semantic and syntactic practices is a signifying process she calls 'text' which replaces the univocity of an attributed meaning with a charged ambiguity that achieves semantic polymorphism, a totality open to infinite processes of signification.

Kristeva's book is a complex deep-dive into the semantic and symbolic processes that underlie poetic practices. At this stage, without focusing on the technicalities and complexities of her analysis, we can draw from this discussion the importance of stylistic figures as rhymes and metaphors for finding open processes of signification that exceed unifying conceptual thought and which open towards new and different processes of meaning-creation. According to Byrne (2021), the metaphor plays a fundamental role in our understanding of the world because it is 'the only way in which understanding can reach outside the system of signs into life itself (Byrne, 2021: 128).' On this note, Byrne (2021: 130) underscores the importance of metaphors, and what he calls its cousins: myth, narrative, story, but also art and music, for re-enchanting our world and convincing people of enacting transformational change in a world which coheres with 'the actual "real" world in all its authenticity (Byrne, 2021: 130-132).'

5. The Workshop



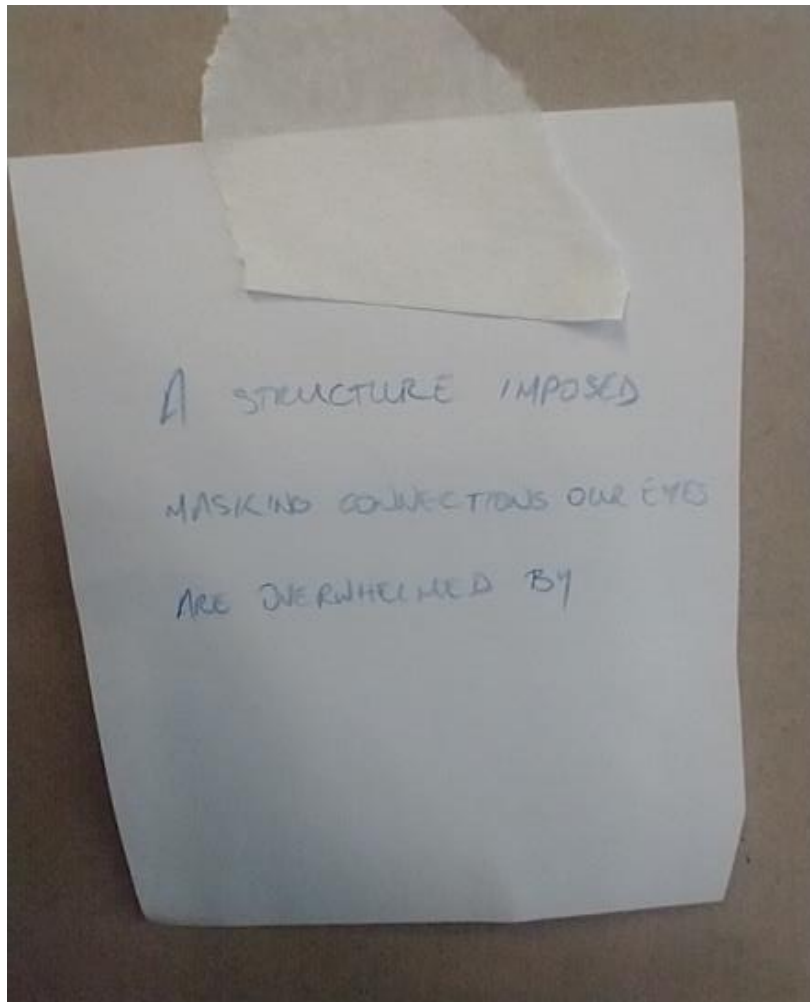
The workshop was conceived as a dialogue between short theoretical interventions, based on the literature described above, and arts-based exercises for which we found our inspiration in ‘a toolkit for arts-based methods for transformative engagement’ created by Pearson et al. (2018). The workshop was moderated by two PhD researchers, one of whom is also an artist: Jennifer Ahern (UCC) and Bob Grumiau (DSIS). Where Jennifer focussed on the arts-based practices and exercises, Bob introduced some of the theory. The discussions and debates following each exercise were moderated alternately. The workshop proceeded as follows.

- a) After an introduction to the DSIS project by Ian Hughes, (corresponding to section 2 above), the context of the polycrisis, and the theoretical framework (Bob Grumiau,

section 3 above), Jennifer introduced the first exercise which was the **somatic comparison** method as described by Pearson et al. (2018: 23). *“The method asks participants to physically embody two different paradigms or contrasting ideas related to sustainability. This gives them an opportunity to reflect and learn from the different physical feelings and emotional responses that may arise. It can open up new dimensions for dialogue and root the new concepts via the embodied experience (Pearson et al. 2018: 23).”* The two contrasting paradigms, ideas, that we used for this exercise were a hyperbolized dualist Cartesian stance and a relational stance in which the participants felt more connected to the – natural – realities that surrounded them. The exercise served to get participants out of their chairs and into their bodies, making them at once feel uncomfortable and more comfortable in the room and in their bodies.

b) The second method we used was an exercise called **‘Evoking the Senses’**. According to Pearson et al. 2018: 29), this method gives participants the opportunity to identify associations and emotions related to a specific issue or case. *‘Participants are asked to consider the case using their full range of senses (hearing, taste, touch, sight, smell, and emotions or energetic feeling), and to record words, thoughts, and associations that come to mind. By capturing and sharing associations, sensations, and emotions, the group becomes more empathetically connected to the case, and to each other (Pearson, 2018: 29).’* During this exercise we asked participants to consider and approach the two stances from the somatic comparison exercise through the naming of individual words. Using a white-board, we wrote down the words that the participants came up with.

c) The lists of words that participants came up with during the second exercise then served as an inspiration for the following exercise: a **poetry writing workshop**. Based on Pearson et al.'s method nr. 17: Prose Poem, we asked participants to reflect upon our discussion of the two stances through the writing of a poem. According to Pearson et al. (2018: 41) *'Writing poetry or poetic prose can be a vehicle for expressing and exploring ideas or emotions in a way that moves beyond rational, linear, and habituated thought patterns. It is a way to engage imaginatively and playfully with one's deeper knowing and intuitive understanding of, or response to, a topic. Verbal images and metaphors that emerge from the process can have an "anchoring" effect; that is, ideas or emotions that are typically expressed through rational thought can be more easily accessed and recalled if they are linked to a personal and visceral, or emotionally charged image.'*



d) The last exercise of the workshop was aimed at bringing together the impressions and lessons from the morning in one last exercise, the making of a **collage**. According to Pearson et al. (2018: 42) A '*collage allows both rational and emotional reasoning to surface through the free combination of images which, due to their evocative power, can contribute inspiration to new imaginative horizons.*' It is typically used to express and share emotions, themes, and ideas via an intuitive visual representation related to a specific topic. It can be an effective tool for clarifying observations or crystallizing ideas, visions, or scenarios before moving into more tangible brainstorming or definition of action steps.' As such, it was a good method for us to conclude the workshop with as it both permitted some time for – collective- reflexion, while being otherwise occupied, and an artistic method through which this reflection could be expressed in non-conceptual terms. The collage proved an effective method for fostering creative discussions, the practice of collaging brought people together, engaging discussions about the images, and subjects of the collage, thus helping to foster a collective reflexive process on the exercises of the



day. Secondly, as an artistic way of expression, it allowed for a different way to express and approach ideas that normally would have been discussed only conceptually, leading to novel and creative results that included areas of experience (affects, hopes...) that are usually excluded from reflective/rational conceptual thinking.

e) The workshop was concluded by a final collective moment in which participants could share/discuss their reflections concerning the exercises and the workshop.

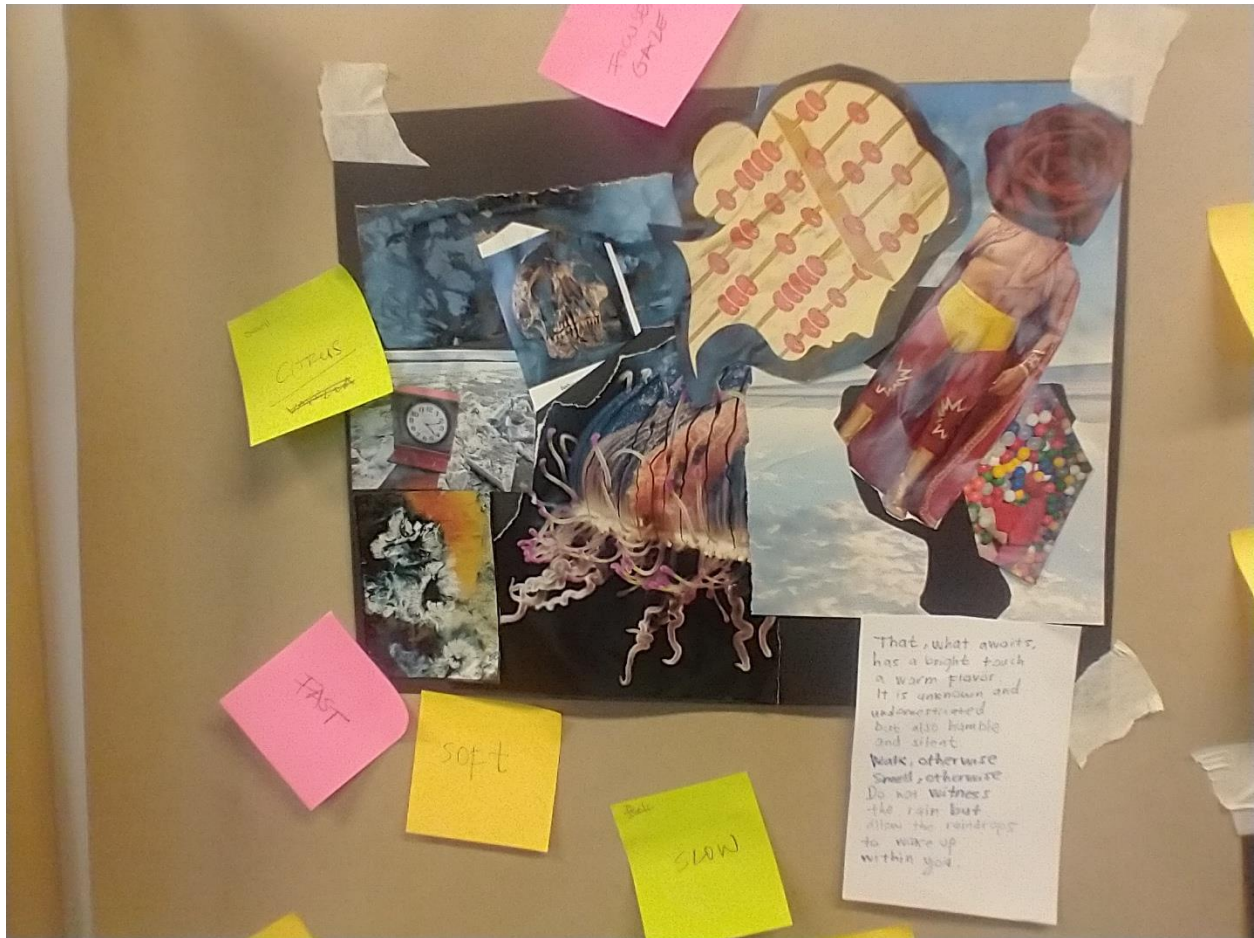
6. Outputs

The principal output of the workshop consists of a number of creative artworks such as poems, drawings and collages. This chapter presents some outputs of the workshop, highlighting how artistic practices and the artworks created during the process served as catalysts for dissolving boundaries—between disciplines, between academic and non-academic spheres, between traditional binaries of thought, and between rational and affective forms of reasoning. The outputs do not merely represent material outcomes; they also enact a shift toward affective and relational modes of engagement, enabling participants to move beyond dualistic frameworks and embrace more interconnected, dynamic ways of thinking and doing. In other words, the results presented here show evidence of a rhizomatic way of thinking/approach that transcends the typical arborescent structures of 'rational' thought. It further makes topics more accessible and opens them up to discussion. We will refrain from 'explaining' the artworks, let it suffice to point out the different, and fore-named, dimensions that are present in the variety of creations listed here and represented on the pictures throughout this report.

Example 1: Poem (anonymous)

A structure imposed
Making connections our eyes
Are overwhelmed by.

Example 2: Collage with poem



Example 3: Poem (anonymous)

Tu Bishvat

Today is the new year

The call of the Shofar wakes you

(and me)

Celebrating the life you give

Green, brown, fruit producing,

You are only to be cherished

And celebrated

Never destroyed.

Note to this poem: Tu Bishvat is a minor Jewish holiday, celebrating nature. It is the day of the year that people also went out to plant trees. It was explained to us that the trees were sacred and could not be destroyed. The poem has to be read with today's geopolitical context in mind.

Example 4: Poem (anonymous)

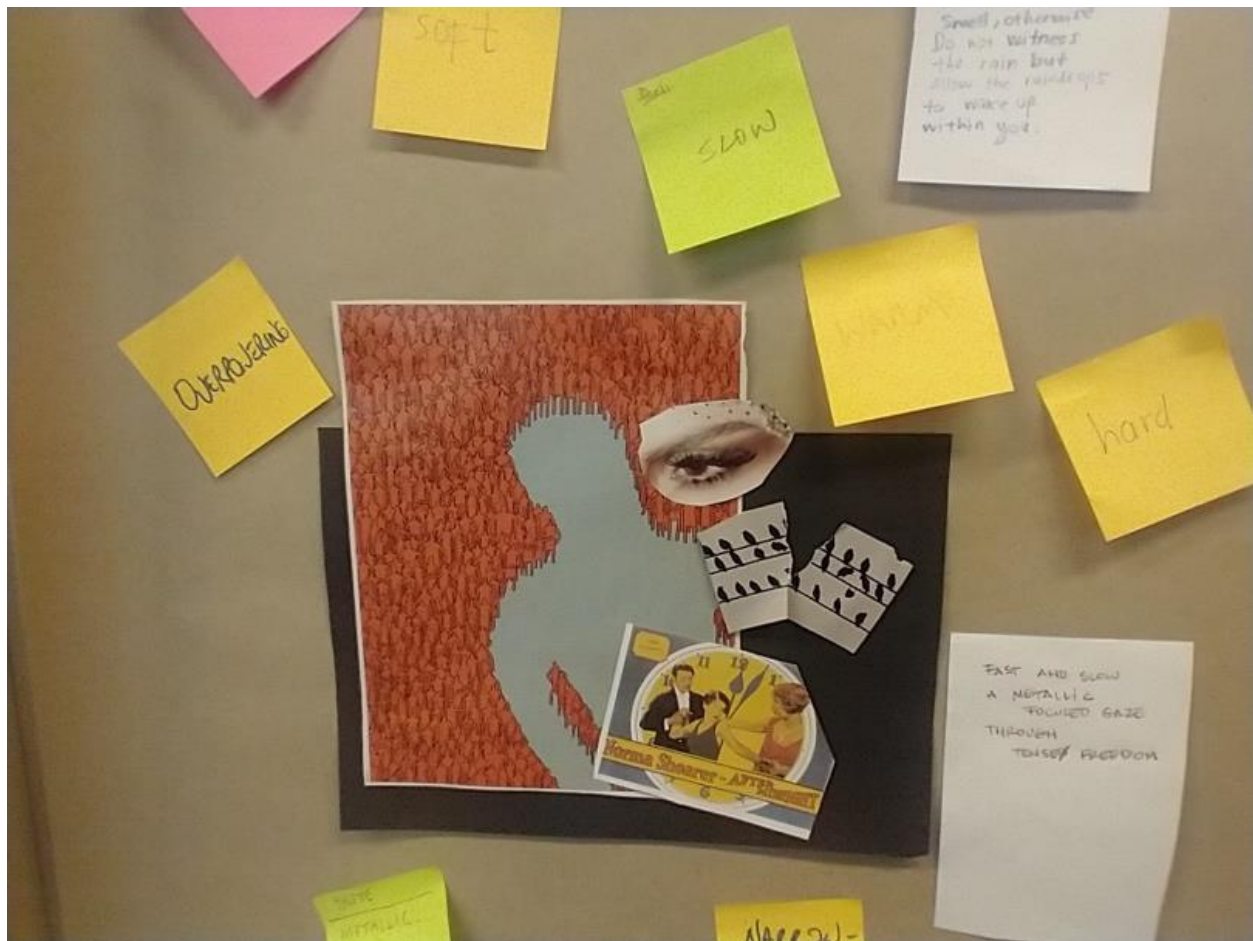
That, what awaits
Has a bright touch
A warm flavour
It is unknown and
undomesticated
but also humble
and silent
walk otherwise
do not witness
the rain, but
allow the raindrops
to wake up
within you.

7. Conclusion: Principal Takeaways



When asked what they enjoyed the most about the workshop, participants mentioned the creative aspects and the opportunity the session presented to express ideas through different (visual) formats. Furthermore, an advantage of the arts-based practices, such as the collage, was the communal aspect of the exercise. The common activity of cutting and pasting united people in a shared activity that, while occupying their hands, freed the mind for more spontaneous and creative thinking and conversation. Further points that were stressed were that the created art-works functioned as icebreakers and prompts for conversation and self-reflection. They formed a simple but effective tool to approach and discuss topics from different perspectives and novel angles, freeing participants from the practical and theoretical confines of their disciplines and backgrounds.

One main point of critique was the thought that the workshop spoke best to people with backgrounds or interest in sociology (and expressive arts), particularly in left-leaning and progressive sociology, and that the methods might struggle with those in more conservative sociological fields and those without sociological grounding/interest. As a consequence, the workshop could be quite hard to run with people who might potentially disagree over some concepts that were shared by participants in the workshop – for example, critique of elements of the scientific method/enlightenment philosophy, or the inability of capitalism and political system to reform without systemic change. This is a very important side note that needs to be kept in mind and explored when running these workshops with policy-makers that might not be as familiar with critical theory and arts-based perspectives.



These findings point towards several important takeaways. First of all, the workshop highlighted the importance of the 'different ways of seeing' element within the DSIS

model, particularly through arts-based practices. These approaches proved effective in opening up new perspectives, enabling participants to move beyond disciplinary boundaries and engage in more open, creative discussions. The collective, creative nature of the activities fostered a sense of community that supports collaboration and exploratory thinking. This method also shows strong potential for making complex, transformative theories more accessible to policy makers by presenting them in an engaging, imaginative context.

Overall, the workshop contributed to the broader effort within the DSIS project of developing innovative and creative methodologies for communicating transformative research to policy audiences.

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