

WE ARE NATURE

a year of community activism



This book documents a year-long (September 2024–September 2025) activism project: art + activism to communicate hope and calls to action inspiring positive change for people and planet.

The We Are Nature project focused on using mixed media visual arts with four separate groups in Norfolk, UK: Norfolk elders; teenage refugees and their families; asylum seekers living in Diss; and the Ukraine teens youth group in Norwich. The project was organised and run by Share Your Story Through Art, a non-profit social enterprise Community Interest Company. Workshops took place twice a month for each group of participants, who were invited to take part via AgeUK Norwich, the Millenium Library Drop in and Draw group, and Norfolk Council REDI (Relocation, Ethnic Diversity and Integration) team.

Art was inspired by data from Norfolk Biodiversity Information Service, by researching the science behind the climate and biodiversity crises, observing our natural surroundings, and by plants and animals from home countries. Workshops used art to celebrate all living things, including endangered plant and animal species living in our local environment. Sharing work-in-progress between different groups each month enabled everyone to contribute to collaborative seasonal wall hangings and flags for air, water and land.

This book is a record of the project, with photographs of the art, reflections on the learning that was achieved in the workshops, and quotations from participants that show the personal and collective impact activism can have.

Emma Skeet, Share Your Story Through Art (SYSTA)

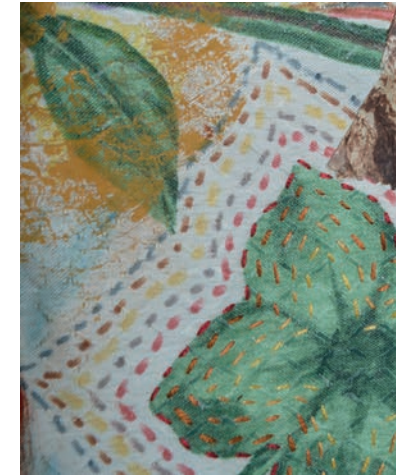
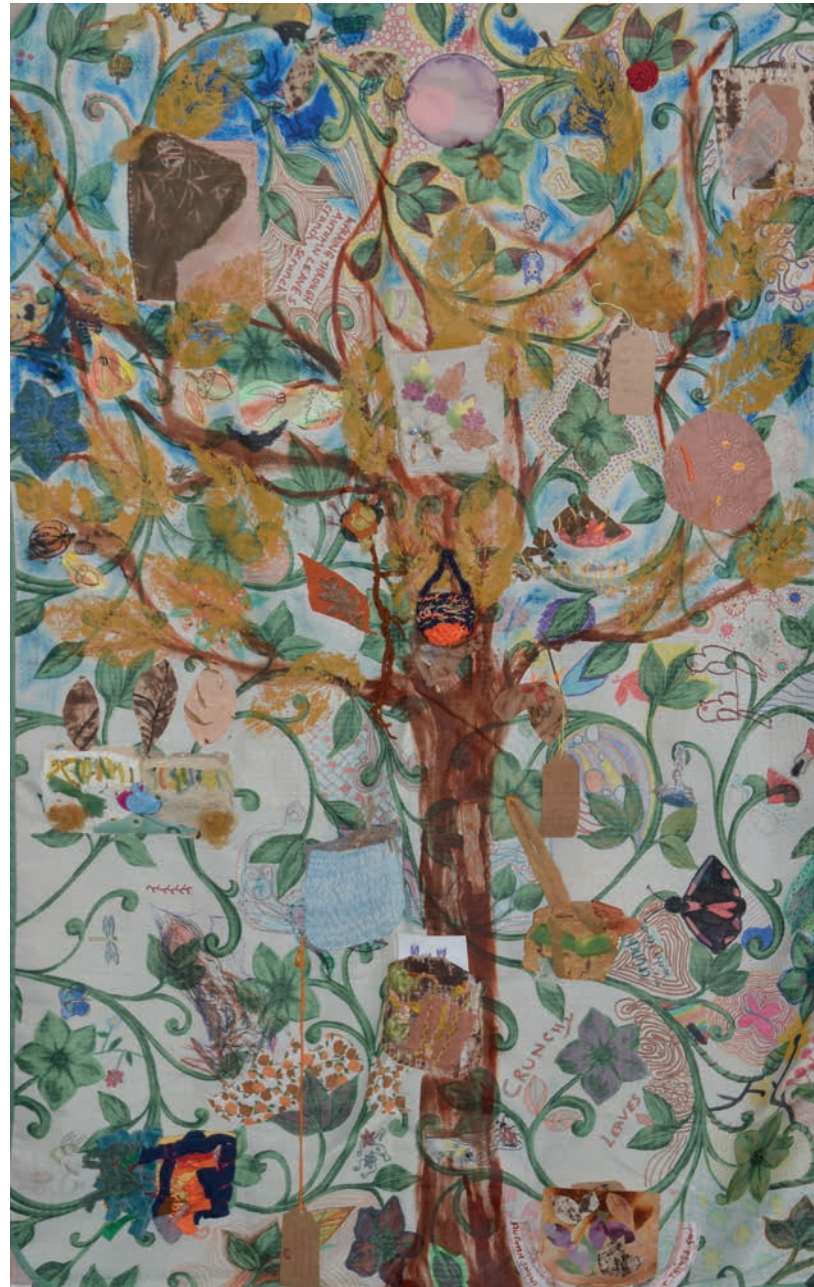


We Are Nature
collage

We Are Nature aimed to:

- Use art, science and well-being to explore and celebrate the benefits of a biodiverse local environment with native and non-native species (human, plant and animal) living in harmony.
- Communicate thoughts and feelings through art that can be difficult to put into words.
- Take time out to relax, play, be curious and create with no 'right' or 'wrong' outcomes.
- Investigate the physical and mental benefits available to us from taking time out in nature (such as breathing in negative ions, mostly found around water and natural areas, and touching soil to absorb mycobacterium vaccae, both of which activate serotonin in our brains).
- Slow down, look down, look up and take time to really notice nature – its colours, sounds, smells, shapes, patterns.
- Protect nature, in our gardens and locally, to support a biodiverse rich and sustainable future for people and planet.
- Provoke thought, providing a launchpad for ideas and calls to action for change.
- Inspire feelings of hope and happiness, connection and empathy, to develop compassion and care for everything alive, helping with eco-anxiety and well-being, rather than feeling powerless to improve our community and the world.

Autumn
mixed media
wall hanging
95cm x 145cm



images on this page:
details of *Autumn* wall hanging
including pockets containing
additional artworks and calls to
action for protecting nature

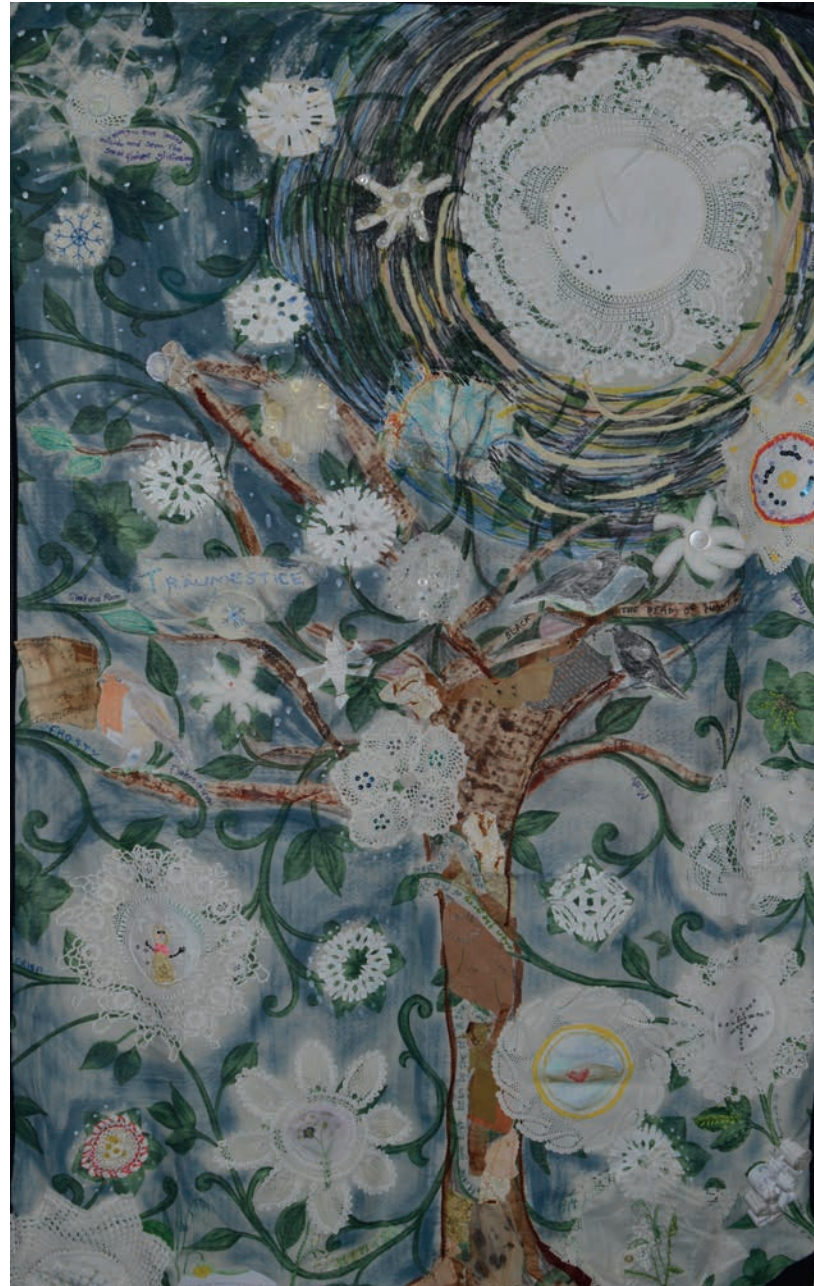


images on this and next page:
Autumn workshops



**This project gave me a new lease of life,
a chance to make small changes in my life,
an opportunity, a community and the creative skills
to take action and inspire action,
to communicate with others
about issues I feel are important.**

Winter
mixed media
wall hanging
95cm x 145cm



images on this page:
details of *Winter* wall hanging



I really enjoy the freedom of the art and being able to express myself.

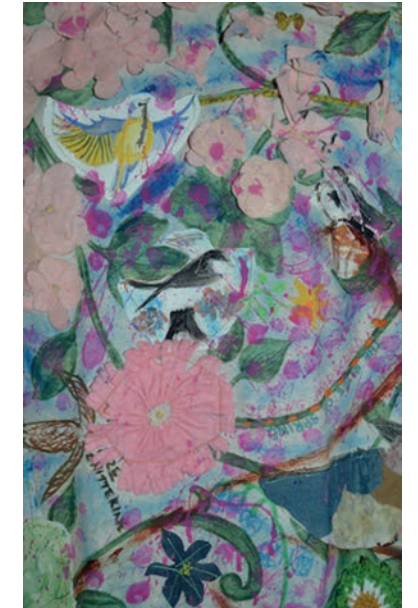
I love the positivity of the whole experience, looking forward to every week taking part in an art challenge and managing to create something good.



*images on this and next page:
details of Winter workshops and wall hanging*



Spring
mixed media
wall hanging
95cm x 145cm



images on this page:
details of *Spring* wall hanging with
pockets containing additional artworks





images on this page:
details of *Spring* workshops



I'm connecting with the natural world in new ways because I'm observing it in order to paint and record it.

I really love the opportunity to play with colour and experiment with new ways of expressing myself in a very supportive environment.

It's been great to join a friendly group as I've been nervous of doing so since retiring. This experience has made a real difference to my life and I've become excited about art and started painting at home and visiting galleries which makes me feel more alive!

Summer
mixed media
wall hanging
95cm x 145cm



images on this page:
details of Summer wall hanging



images on this page:
details of *Summer* workshops



Art possesses the power to shape our emotions and ideas in many ways.

It enables us to explore the way we see and interpret the world. It helps us get connected, feel, learn and explore the right use of natural resources. I think art has a role as it communicates the fragility of nature, but also hope. It communicates to all cultures.

It is amazing discovering the creative abilities within me and learning more about biodiversity and benefits from nature.



Sketchbooks
made from repurposed
packaging and papers

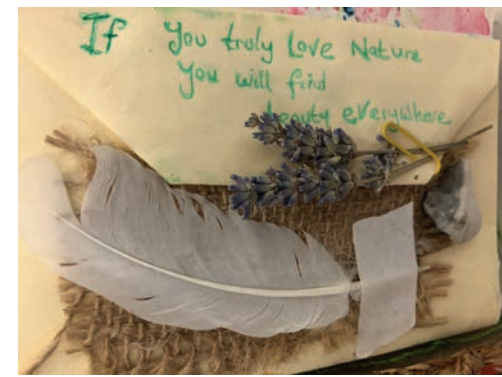
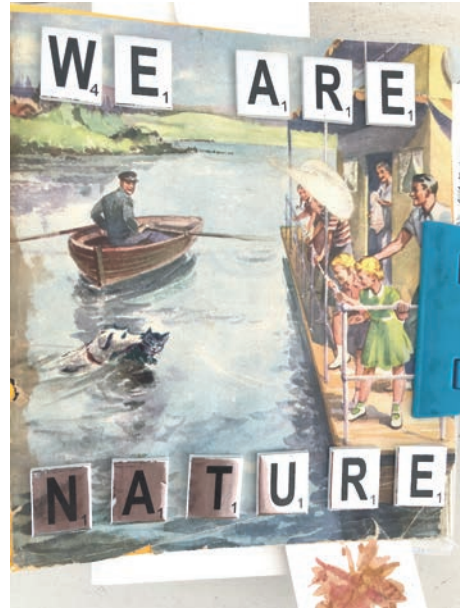
The project was an outstanding success, made possible with the enthusiasm – and dedication to attending workshops throughout the whole year – of participants. Everyone made their own sketchbook to use between the bi-monthly workshops for sketching nature, recording emotions, researching and taking notes on the topics raised.

We underestimated the positive impact taking part would have on participants' well-being – reducing loneliness and increasing self-confidence, converting "I am not good at art, I am not sure if I can stay in a room with people I don't know, I can't draw, I can't thread a needle" into proud faces, fun, new friends and hope.

Participants were worried and overwhelmed by the global climate and biodiversity crises, so were keen to focus on local issues and ways of creating a sustainable and resilient community. They felt proud to be key contributors to improving the local environment by changing their behaviour and inspiring others, through their art, to make simple adaptations to the way they live too.

**I thought I knew how great I felt
in nature, but these workshops
gave me the science of why and
the ability to shout about it.**

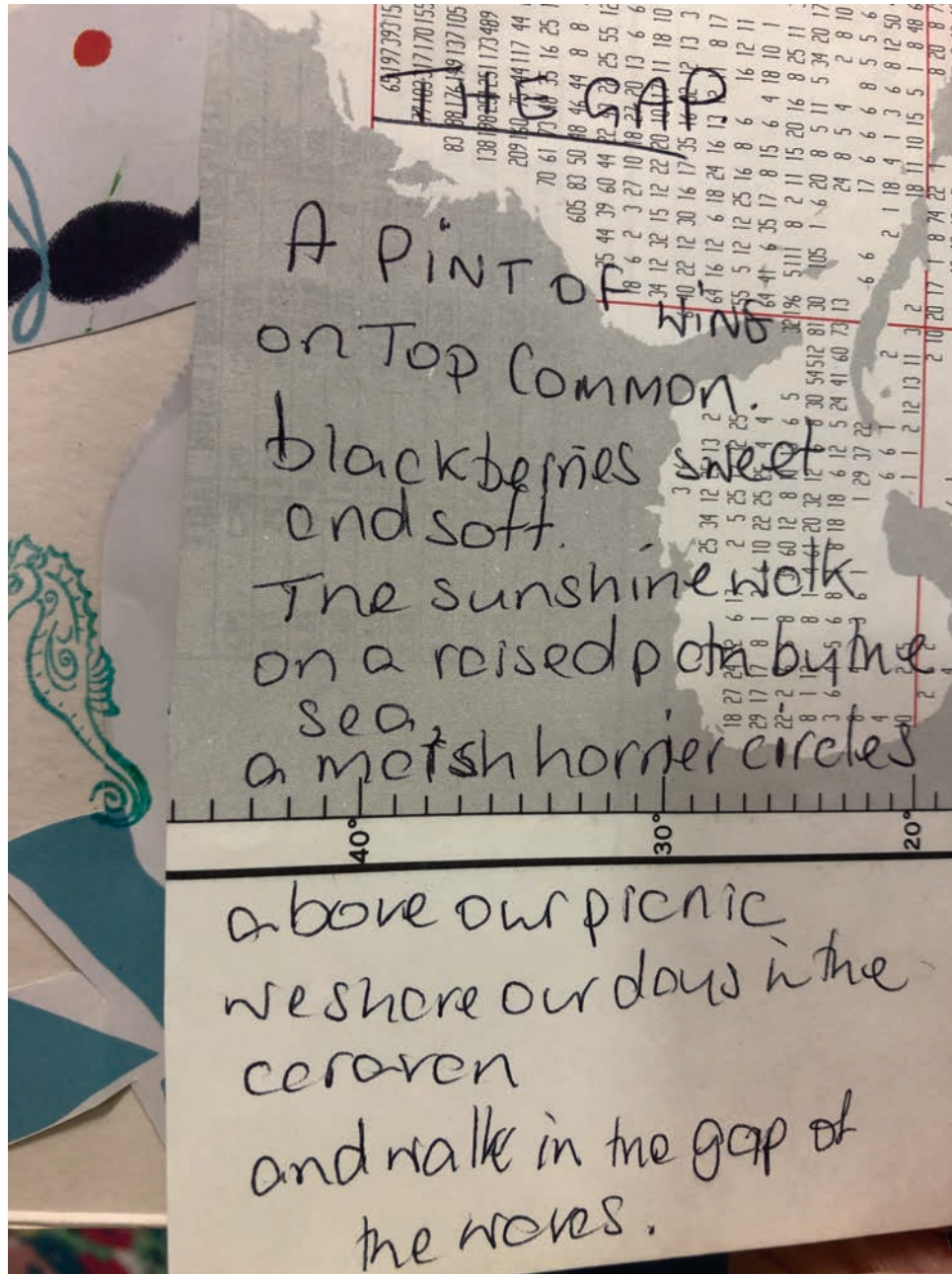
**I have made new friendships
through this group and loved
having this routine fortnightly,
something to look forward to.**



images on this and previous page: sketchbooks and details of pages

We can PROTECT ENDANGERED PLANT SPECIES IN SEVERAL WAYS INCLUDING:

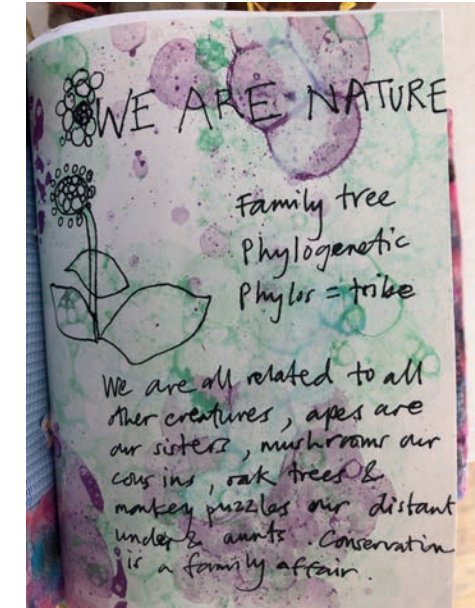
- SEED BANKING - Collect and store seeds, plant material, and data to maintain genetic diversity.
- HABITAT RESTORATION - Protect and restore habitats and increase the number of endangered species in protected areas.
- SUSTAINABLE USE - Use plant resources without depleting populations - for example through sustainable harvesting and ecotourism.
- USE NATURAL PESTICIDES - avoid using pesticides on plants and vegetables, and instead use natural and eco-friendly pest control methods.
- PLANT NATIVE VEGETATION - Plant native vegetation that attracts natural predators which can reduce the need for chemical interventions.
- SUPPORT LOCAL COMMUNITIES - when traveling; support local communities of supporting local business.
- Education and awareness.
Raise awareness about endangered plant species through education awareness camps - GNS!



sketchbook page
 with poem

THE GAP

A pint of wine
 on Top Common
 blackberries sweet
 and soft
 The sunshine walk
 on a raised path by the
 sea
 a marsh harrier circles
 above our picnic
 we share our days in the
 caravan
 and walk in the gap of
 the waves.



images on this page:
 sketchbook pages

Project participants were very keen to have access to the science and research findings behind the climate and biodiversity crises in order to better understand and take action. The project encouraged them to see nature through the lens of the Planetary Boundaries, using art to share information with each other and the wider community.

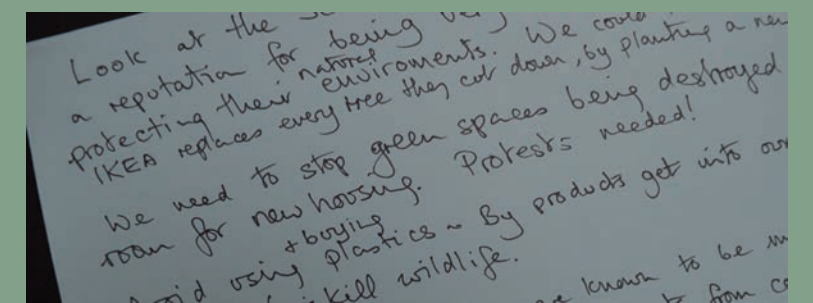
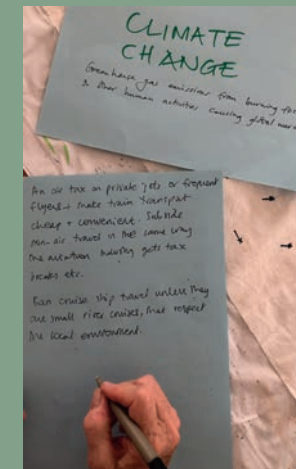
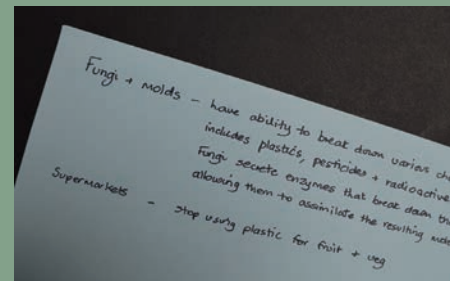
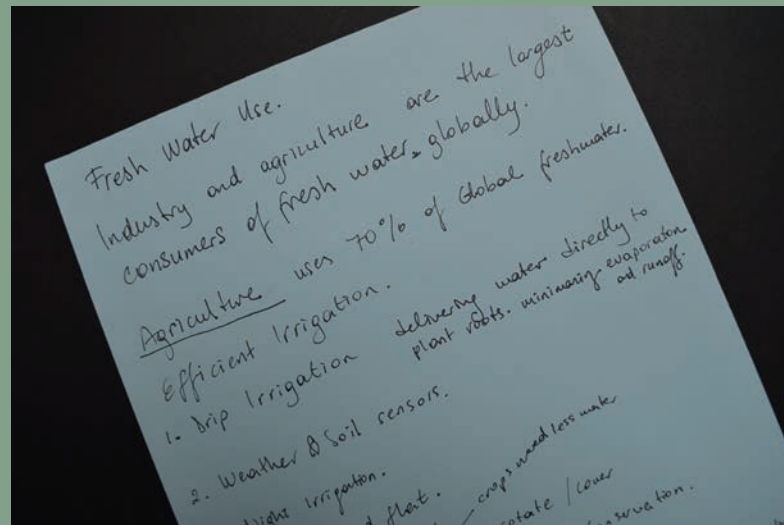
In September 2023, a team of scientists quantified the planetary processes that regulate the stability and resilience of the Earth system. These Planetary Boundaries were first proposed by former Stockholm Resilience Centre director Johan Rockström and a group of internationally renowned scientists in 2009. (Please see Stockholm Resilience Centre for more information).

Each Planetary Boundary has a tipping point, which is crossed when humans pursue activities harming the elements needed to enable that boundary to stay healthy and within safe zones. For example (information correct during the year of the project):

- Nature is in decline, reducing our ability to feed the planet. 70% of crops rely on pollinators. We need to work together to keep thriving corridors for wildlife, wetlands and natural forest systems for moisture feedback, healthy soils, nutrient sinks, carbon sinks and diversity of grass, trees and animals in the food web.

- The variety of habitats on earth need protecting. We need to work together to protect forests, oceans and wetlands that store carbon and produce oxygen. We need to work together to stop deforestation and further fossil fuel exploration, and to stop further expansion of roads and intensive agricultural land.

- A quarter of all carbon dioxide emitted into the atmosphere is eventually dissolved in the oceans, increasing acidity and killing plants and animals, such as sea kelp which helps draw down carbon dioxide. Losses of these species changes the ocean ecosystems and leads to drastic reductions in fish stocks. We need to work together to keep carbon dioxide down in order to ensure ocean currents circulate heat to support life.



images on this and previous page:
Planetary Boundaries research by participants

- Novel entities pollute the air and water, including microplastics, genetically modified organisms, chemical and nuclear waste. Herbicides and pesticides contribute to pollution and also disrupt endocrine production altering hormone levels in humans and animals. We need to move energy production to wind and solar and reduce single-use plastics.

- Fresh water is the planet's bloodstream. With rising temperatures, rivers are in danger of running dry. Humans need thousands of litres of water every day to survive, mostly to produce food. We need to protect carbon sinks in wetlands, rivers, soil and oceans.

- Glaciers help cool the planet by reflecting 90-95% of the sun's heat back into space. We need to work together to keep stable ice caps and sea levels, enabling a reliable climate to support agriculture.

- Nitrogen and phosphorus are key ingredients of life, but overuse of chemical fertilisers results in excess phosphorus run-off, leading to eutrophication and dead zones in soil, rivers and oceans. This then causes the death of plant and animal life. We need to transform transport, buildings and cities, food systems and manufacturing, including supporting sustainable, regenerative fishing and farming.

- 75% of human made pollutants are from fossil fuel combustion and agriculture. Air pollution kills 7.5 million people a year and take 3.3 years off each human life. We need to stop subsidies for fossil fuels and put a price on carbon emissions.

An air tax on private jets + make train transport cheap + convenient. Subsidise non-air travel in the same way the aviation industry gets tax breaks etc.
Ban cruise ship travel unless they are small river cruises, that respect the local environment.



+ blanket fishing
Ban bottom trawling, plant kelp farms.
Make aeroplanes + cruise ships eco friendly

images on this and previous page:
Planetary Boundaries research by participants



images on these pages:
sketchbook pages



Birdsong
Birds only sing when they feel safe and the environment is free from danger.

Over time, humans have learned to associate birdsong with safety.

The rhythmic and melodic patterns of birdsong have a calming effect on the mind, promoting relaxation and stress relief.

Birdsong can stimulate the brain without being too distracting. This gentle stimulation can help relieve fatigue that impairs concentration.

Evolutionary mechanism

soothing effect

Cognitive stimulation



images on this and next page:
sketchbook pages



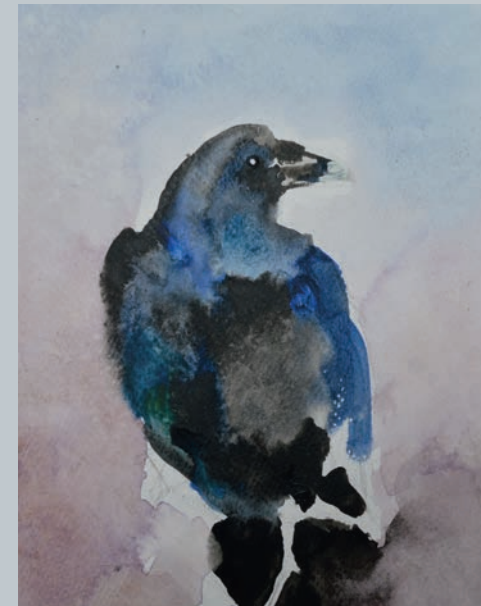
I have loved the impact of the sessions on my day to day life.

As I have started painting, I have become more observant of the beauty of the natural world, which makes me feel happier.

I am also feeling less anxious about climate change as I'm connecting more to ideas about what we can do on a micro level.

I have also really loved doing art as part of a group and connecting to people through doing something positive together and playing with art.

I had no idea when I started how much of a turning point this would be in my life! I intend to carry on in some way exploring all these projects into the future.



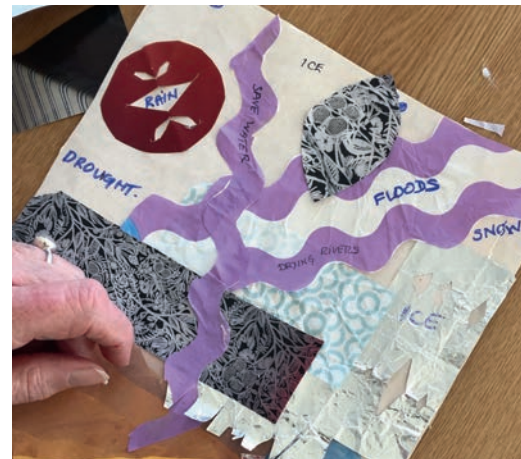
We learnt about the **univocity of being** between humans, plants and animals – radically different but radically equal.

About the concept of **biophilia** – an evolutionary need to connect with the natural world for cognitive, mental, emotional and spiritual development, and the vital link between the immune function, nervous system, health and being in nature.

We learnt from nature – including **plant wisdom** of resilience, supportive networks of communication and beneficial relationships with others.

We learnt about the inequalities of access to nature in the UK and about **equigenesis**, which refers to the 'equigenic effect' – how access to nature helps to reduce the link between socio-economic inequality and health inequality. We discovered that people who live near parks and woodlands, and spend time in them, had lower levels of income-related health inequalities and mental well-being problems.

We learnt about **ecological grief** – how climate change affects our mental health – with workshops providing a safe space to discuss ideas and share experiences. This brought up fears of floods, diseases, heat, loss of homes, loss of ways of life, of cultures. And we also shared hopes and dreams of a safe future, locally focused and resilient, imagining and inventing new words to describe this new world.

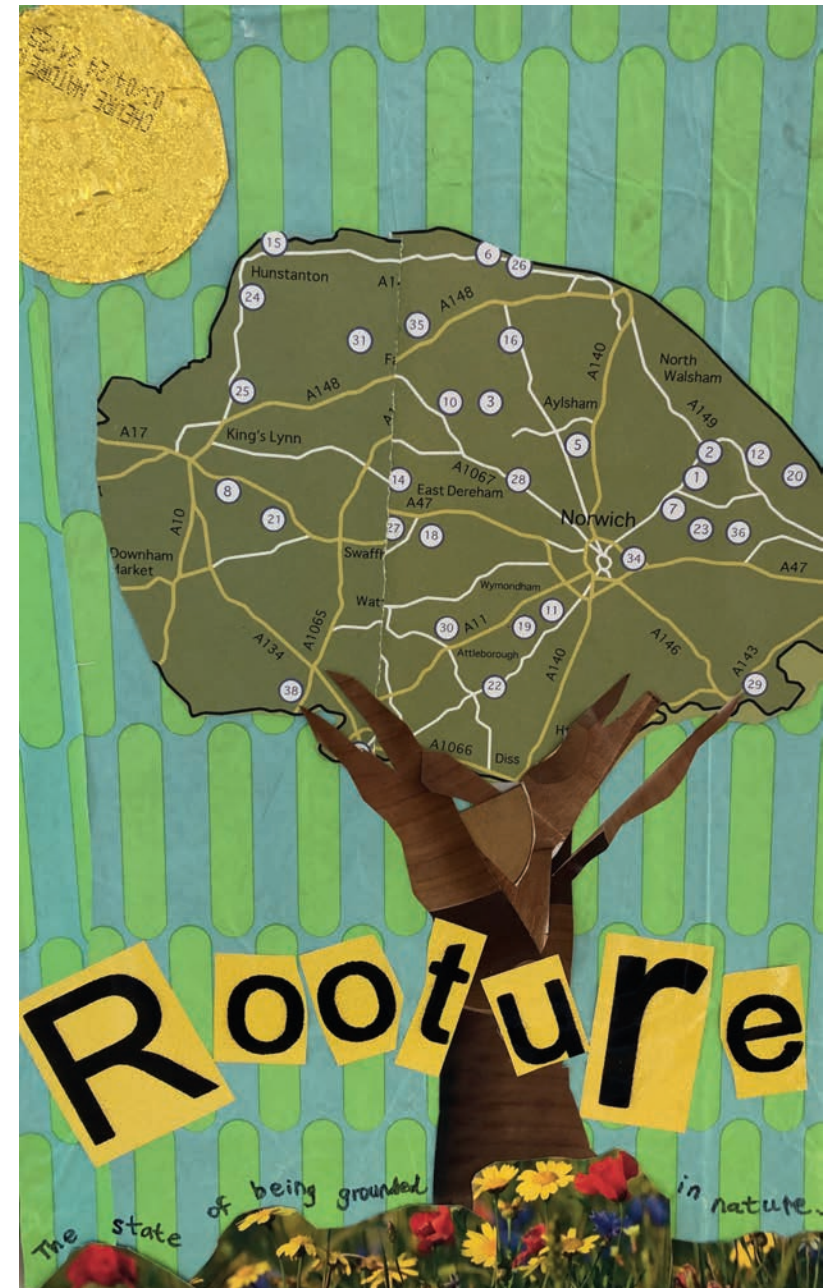


images on this and previous page:
inventing new words to describe
feelings about nature



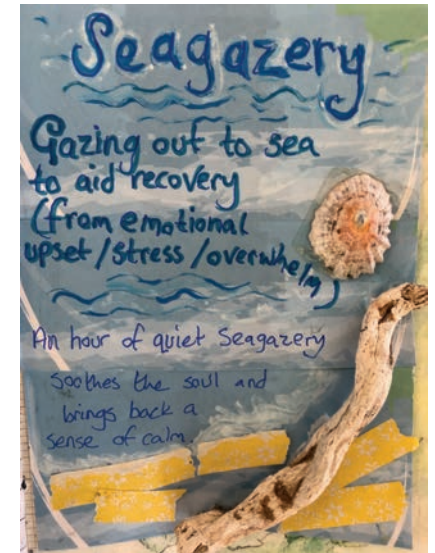


images on this and next page:
inventing new words describing
feelings around nature, hope
and a sustainable future





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inventing new words describing
feelings around nature, hope and a
sustainable future*





images on this and next page:
subvertising posters for a sustainable future

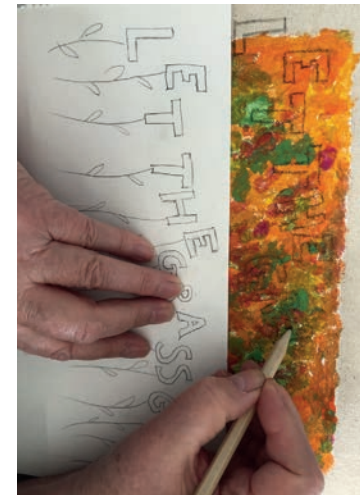
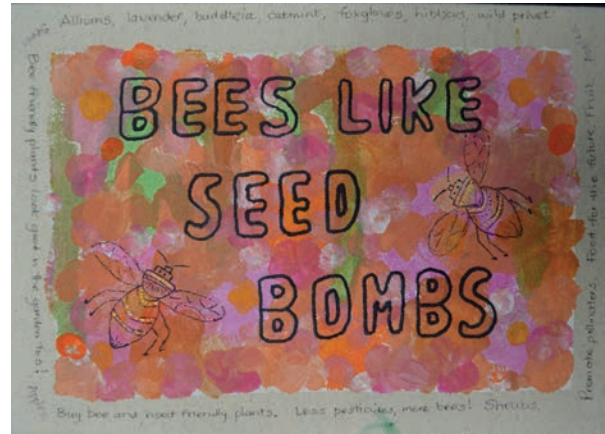
I have an increased awareness of the work that is being done by environmentalists to bring about positive environmental changes and have really enjoyed exploring and relating these to myself, my experiences and the local area by producing seasonal artworks singly and in collaboration with other group members.

We researched local farmers who **nurture the land** – chemical free, healthy soil.

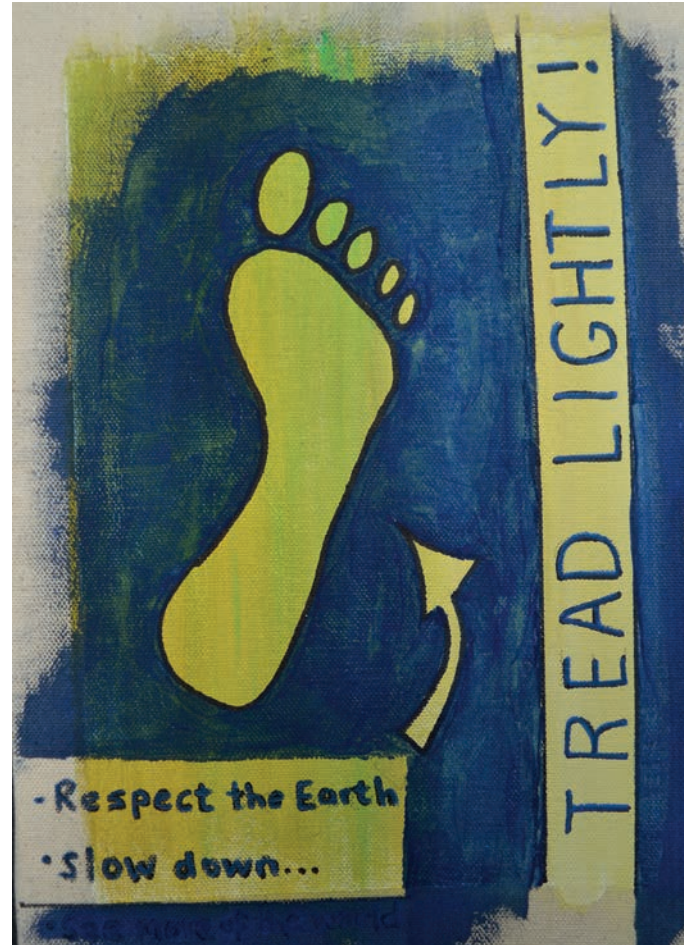
We learnt about shifting our values from a consumer to a **conservator economy** – buy less, waste less, buy local, ethical and seasonal.

We started a dialogue with the local council about stopping their use of carcinogenic pesticides in our parks.

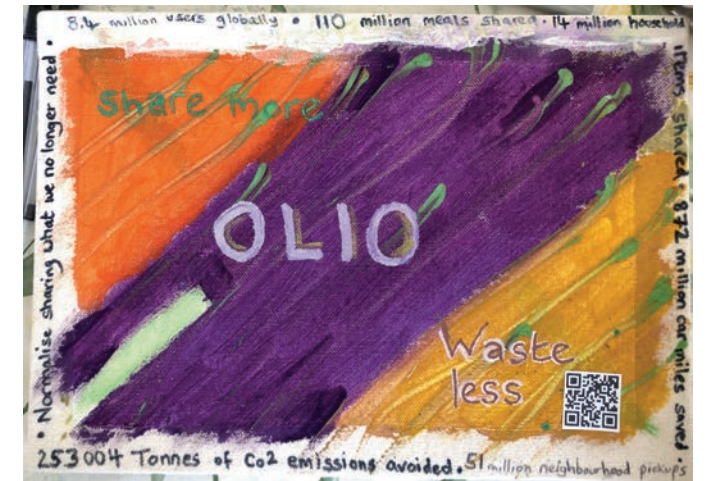




images on this and next page:
subvertising posters for a sustainable future



images on this and next page:
subvertising posters for a sustainable future



I enjoyed being let loose to express myself and being encouraged to try new things.



We learnt that the elders and refugee communities are fragile and transitory. This makes their involvement and chance to share their voice even more powerful. Two elderly participants died during the year and many refugee families were moved to different cities. Participants loved being able to carry on and complete art work others had started, remembering them while they worked on their pieces.

We learnt that in order to care for other people and the planet it is important to care for ourselves – nurturing our mental and physical strength, focus and positivity. Participants swapped health tips at workshops to use at home between our meetings, with a supportive community building over the year, full of laughter and sharing ideas.



images on this and previous page:
Rasta lion embroidery, sketchbook pages and shared artwork with poem

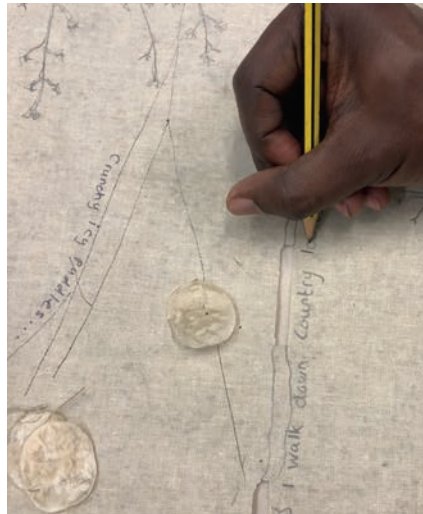
May the Winds of Love blow softly
and whisper in your ear





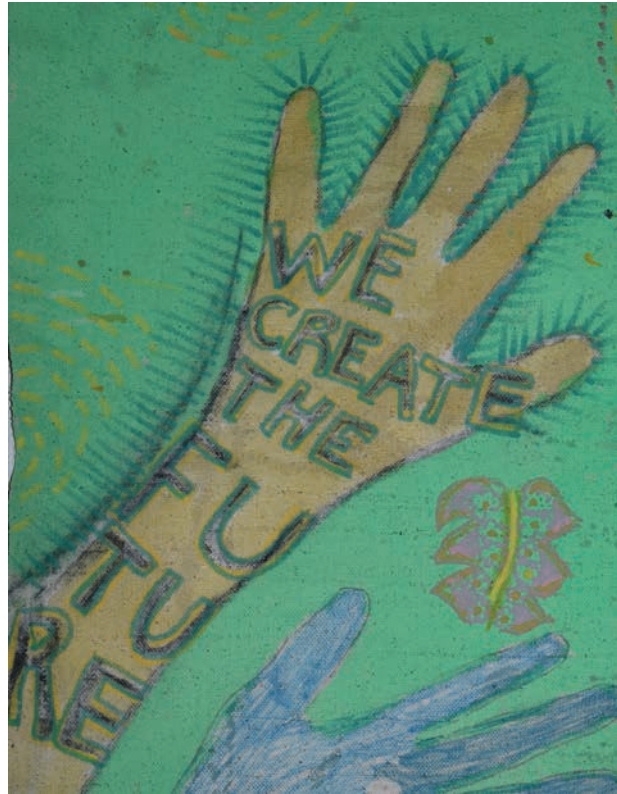
I have enjoyed the opportunity to have a go at aspects of art I never would have otherwise.

It has been great to enjoy the company of others and see the considerable differences in each of our works whilst learning about the environment and our important role in it.



*images on this and next page:
details of shared artworks*





*images on this and
next page:
collaborative artwork
inspired from visiting
The Field of Joy*



I hope that this makes people campaign
for Green politics.



To those who don't dare...
It's fine to try everything and make
mistakes when you're being creative.



*images on this and
previous page:
collaborative artwork
inspired from visiting
The Field of Joy*

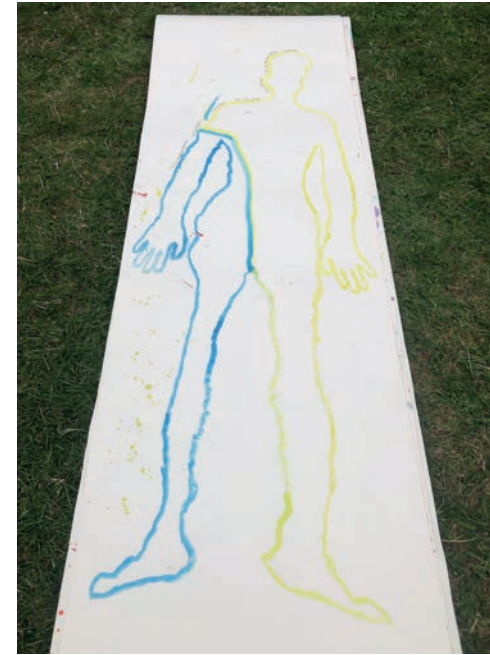
I hope that people will see that paying
close attention to nature on your doorstep
connects you to the bigger picture and
that small acts locally to ~~some~~ make a difference



WE ARE NATURE
SHARING OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE CHANGING SEASONS
SHARING WAYS TO HELP NATURE
THINKING ABOUT CHANGES WE CAN MAKE AND
WHAT I CAN DO



images on this and next page:
self-portraits reflecting who we are, our
feelings about nature and what we are
proud of about ourselves





We Are Nature
 In good company
 Learning from each other
 Awareness of our environment
 Beautiful Views of the park
 each season
 Fun With Art



I valued having a shared goal with others, creating something that hopefully speaks to people. Time spent thinking about nature and our place in the grand scheme of things and what we can do to improve biodiversity etc.

Wendy Wiggall
 I care for people & nature

We Are Nature

Taking part in this 12 month project has been a wonderful journey of discovery about myself, nature, science, community;

Researching our local networks of positive, regenerative alternatives – ecogriculture, conservation, creativity – has inspired me to change my ways of living, adapting to eating more local, sustainable food makes me feel more in control of my health & that of the planet.

I feel more in touch with nature, notice the details from season to season, want to nurture & protect our commons as our equals – land, sea, air, fresh water – for without them we are nothing.

I am overjoyed to have met inspiring people & their power, confidence, passion to be brave, discover new ideas, talk deeper, provoke thoughts, share hopes & dreams – using art as an expression of our dissenting voice, stronger together, & a celebration of planet earth



images on this and previous page:
 self-portraits reflecting who we are, our feelings about nature and what we are proud of about ourselves



We Are Air
flag 115cm x 130cm



images on this page:
details of We Are Air flag

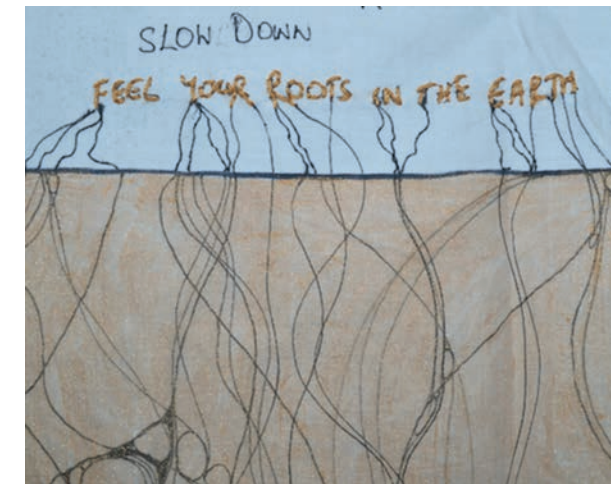




We Are Land
flag 115cm x 130cm



images on this page:
details of
We Are Land flag





images on this page:
workshops with asylum
seekers at Diss Hotel

It has been amazing!

Sharing experiences and thoughts, being supported to experiment without fear, discover new techniques, being inspired to reuse or find new artistic uses for everyday objects and materials, find new ways to express myself, work alongside and get to know other people on a group project.

I'm seeing art from new perspectives, listening to the views of others and seeing how this reflects in their art, and taking on board new things to try.



images on this page:
We Are Land and
We Are Water flag
workshops

Thank you to all the amazing people who took part in We Are Nature.

We could not have done it without you!

Thank you for funding support from: The National Lottery Awards for All Community Fund; Norfolk County Council Norfolk Arts Service Arts Project Fund; and The Clan Trust.

Thank you for support-in-kind and skill-sharing from the wonderful staff and volunteers at: AgeUK Norwich; Friends of Waterloo Park gardeners; Millenium Library Drop in and Draw; Norfolk Biodiversity Information Service; Norfolk Council REDI team; Norwich School; and The Field of Joy.

Thank you to Anglia Print for being a Climate Positive Printing Company, a certified partner of Climate Care and zero waste to landfill since 2005.



Share Your Story Through Art Community Interest Company (SYSTA) provide workshops, events and resources using art and science to raise awareness of what we can all do to help with the climate and biodiversity crises and to inspire change for a sustainable future for people and planet.

Our work is guided by principles of: respect for each other and the planet, empathy, kindness, resilience, self-belief, wellness, positivity, teamwork, community building, collaboration, support of others, innovative future thinking, political agency, activism, environmental awareness, the valuing of traditional and indigenous knowledge of the local community/region/planet, and developing creative confidence.

SYSTA was established by artist Emma Skeet and is supported by a Board of Directors. SYSTA registered as a Community Interest Company Ltd. by guarantee with Companies House on 18/09/2023. As a social enterprise all profit is reinvested into the aims of SYSTA for the benefit of the community. SYSTA does not hold financial reserves. Projects take place once funding has been secured.

To take part in, or collaborate with, SYSTA projects, and for a free pdf of the SYSTA 'Artivism Toolkit' - full of ideas to create art with your own group and use as inspiration to decide on a 'pledge' to ask school leaders and town councils to work towards, such as using local sustainable food suppliers in school and council canteens, to stop using pesticides in local parks, etc. - please contact:

systaworkshops@gmail.com

www.systaworkshops.wix.com/systa