

Diverse Ecologies

A proposal for a research residency on the Kidsgrove Canal, with Appetite
Stoke and The Canal and River Trust.



Images above: Top: Anna Francis research project exploring Stoke-on-Trent Brownfields **Bottom Left** Anna Francis ongoing project looking at plants and ecologies, Public workshop at the Floating Ballast Seed Garden, Arncliffe, 2012 Bristol. **Bottom Right** Press mould workshop on Portland St, Stoke-on-Trent, The Portland Inn Project, 2017.

Diverse Ecologies – A proposal for a research residency on the Kidsgrove Canal.

KEYWORDS: Vessels, water, rituals, storytelling, conversation, ecologies, walking, plants, urban nature, companionship, nature recovery, biodiversity and tea.

A research and development project for Kidsgrove Canal, to understand more about the canal as a site for potential leisure and social activity, developing ecologies and a destination for walkers. The project will aim to identify and work with canal users, volunteers and communities surrounding the canal, in order to find ways of working together which can support developing ecologies and biodiversity, and potentially locating a group to consider longer term approaches to the canal and its development as a space for coming together.

Having gained an understanding of some of the users of the canal via the BA Fine Art student art trail 'Tunnel Visions' which took place in March 2023 and was supported by Appetite and Canal and River Trust, and via further conversation with Appetite some key considerations around the Canal as a unique and diverse ecology, and recognising Canal and River Trust as a custodian of these special Nature corridors which criss-cross the country.

Artist and researcher Anna Francis' work aims to create space to discuss and reframe city resources, through participatory art interventions, which involve the people of a place in identifying ways of working together to make positive changes, which can be both temporary and more permanent. Recent and ongoing projects include [The Portland Inn Project](#), Stoke-on-Trent where Anna is a co-director collaborating with Rebecca Davies and the community of Portland St, working to create positive change for a neighbourhood and [The Spode Rose Garden](#), a creative community horticulture project where Anna has been lead artist since 2013.

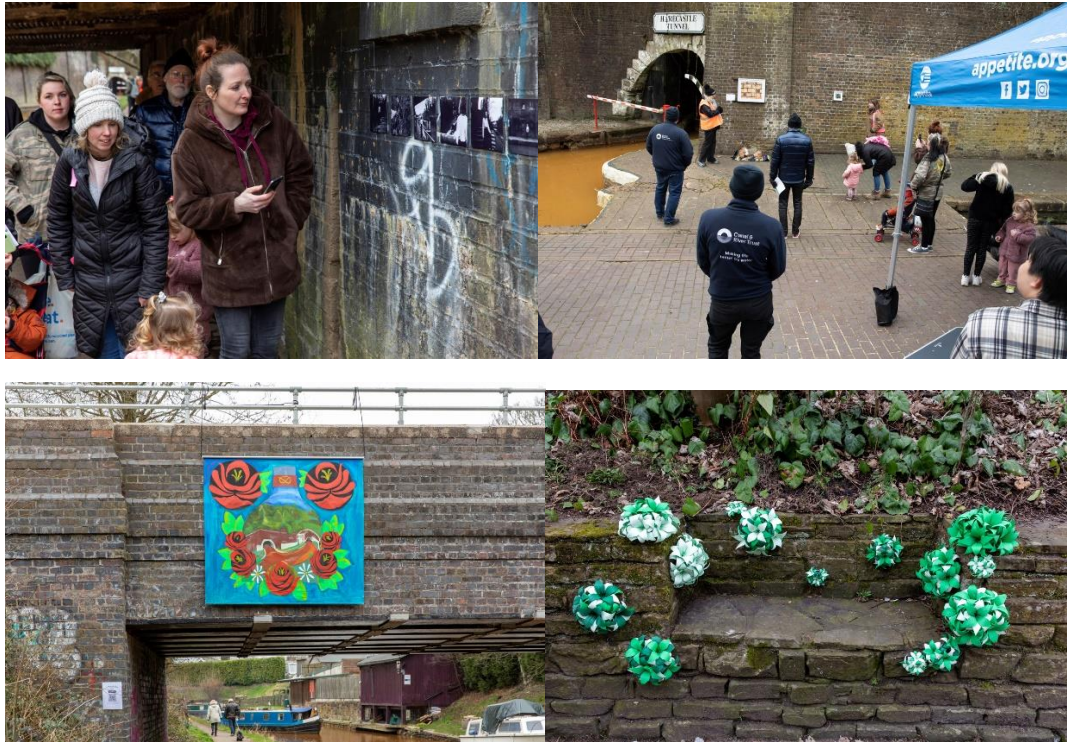
For the Canalside residency, Anna would like to accompany Canal and River Trust staff on days when they are opening the tunnel, to begin work to map and track the ecologies of the canal, and understand what is there. Anna also hopes to centre walking practices as a way to find discussion space and companionable methods for looking at our surroundings. The research residency would involve a series of scheduled walks for both invited individuals and then later, the public, to consider the developing biodiversity of the canal, as a starting point to discuss human<>nature relationships, and using ecologies as a way of framing each human individual's interaction with and impact on nature.

Walks will be scheduled which explore themes such as; the canal as post-industrial brownfield, weeds or flowers (?), developing biodiversity and human<>nature. We will use this as a starting point to consider making positive interventions on the canal which encourage better Human to Human and Human to Environment companionship.

There is potential for a co-created proposal to be written for biodiversity development, connecting to the work being undertaken by Nature England and the consortium working on the Nature Recovery Plan for Staffordshire.

A bi-monthly blog will keep track of the occurring themes and conversation, developments, progress and outcomes.

In addition, Anna will support a group of BA Fine Art students to research and then plan and deliver a Canalside Art Trail for March 2024, building on the success of the 2023 trail.



Images from the Staffordshire University Fine Art Student 'Tunnel Visions' Trail in partnership with Appetite and Canal and River Trust, March 2023.

How will the residency work?

Stage One: WANDER, MEET and CONNECT (Sept. – October 2024)

Anna proposes a staged research residency, which first aims to MEET and CONNECT to people interested in, working at or using the canal and observe, and to meet local people with connections to the canal, including established groups and individuals that self-identify as having a connection to the places of the canal. Anna would like to meet, workers on the canal, people who live there, organisations, businesses and communities that neighbour the canal, and people already connected to the project work so far, including the Heritage Adviser and Ecologist. In addition, desk based research will enable an understanding of the canal and its history and current usage. Anna would love to test a biodiversity mapping session in October with a small group, to see what species might be identified, potentially alongside a volunteer drive etc as appropriate.



Image info: Community Night Walk, led by Anna Francis at CTRL Shift Conference, Stoke-on-Trent, 2019.

Stage Two: REFINE, EXPLORE AND RECORD (Nov 23 – Jan 24 with 2 X schedule walks during this time)

Anna would then like to begin across November to January, to test ways of working and intervening on the canal. First we may plan some Community Walks, where the people met and engaged in stage one can walk together, and share ideas while walking of the future of the canal. This will be a closed walk approach, with invited walkers, at first. We can test the use of Human Noticeboards (an idea developed during Community Night Walks which Anna programmed with Penny Vincent from 2012 – 2019) where attendees will share the work they do in relation to the canal and local infrastructure/communities and services, and describe opportunities to collaborate.

We will look to begin and end walks somewhere warm and dry, in order to think about potential next stage workshops for stage three. For these walks, Anna proposes to develop a mobile Tea Garden Apothecary backpack, which will be a way to carry the materials needed to brew a tea – so that at some point en route the group can stop for a tea break and talk. Teas will be made with a selection of herbs, and we can begin to consider our relationship to plants, and the possibility of canalside growing for companionship, commune and community.



Image: Anna Francis and Andrew Branscombe Birder's Paradise project, an urban nature exploration project, where a mobile birdhide which visited 4 sites across SOT in 2014, with bespoke artworks resulting from each interaction. Commissioned by Appeties, Stoke.

Anna will work across groups and people in order to work together to plan Interventions which test some of the future ways of bringing people to consider the canal and its future development in relation to the question of biodiversity recording and access/safety on the canal.

Anna is particularly interested in connecting with women via the project, to understand more about women's relationship with the spaces and places of the canal; as recent canal walks and conversations with people using the canal have demonstrated that less women are using the canal, particularly since covid.

Anna will also be working with Staffordshire University students to plan and deliver creative interventions during this time, bringing them for a development day, before they are given the opportunity to propose art works for a Canal Trail for March 2024 (more detail below).

Stage Three: Intervening and Gathering (FEB – MARCH 2024).

Through the earlier stages of the project, Anna would hope to identify sites for possible intervention along the canal, and potentially, pockets for biodiversity development, particularly working with the ecologist to identify appropriate edibles, and wild species that could be used to create a canalside

apothecary – an opportunity to talk about the canal as a site for recovery and wellbeing through nature. Staffordshire University Diverse Ecologies Weekend Scheduled Walk and Interventions to take place in March 2024 with students supported to install an art trail alongside a volunteer drive with Appetite and the Canal and River Trust.

Anna Francis project would aim to end with one celebratory event/sharing of the work generated (which could be a book launch/resource or exhibition, as determined by the process.) Potentially this could be to set up a nature recording station at the Canal and River Trust Lodge, to share information about the diverse species of the canal. The Intervention and Gathering stage will act as a proposal for future ways of working together, and will form the basis of the Onwards Proposal.

Stage Four: Next steps (MARCH 2024)

Writing proposal for Onward work potential project and/or recommendations delivered to Appetite and The Canal and Rivers Trust March 2024 (4 days to write and deliver proposal) to consider what next for April 2024 onwards.

Past projects and approach to research and development of work:

Rethinking the Brownfield – Body of work between 2012 - 2019 involving exploring interim nature sites in the city of Stoke-on-Trent portfolio of past work and approach here:

<https://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/6904/2/A%20Francis%20Brownfield%20UoA32%20REF2021.pdf>

A few images of completed outcomes of Anna's research process to demonstrate the way the process can lead to final artworks:



Images Above: Urban Nature exploration guide commissioned by Saturday Market Project and Wayward Plants Walk to launch guide at London Design Week, 2014.



Images: Left Brownfield Ikebana, (Ikebana is Japanese flower arranging, using strict structures to create floral displays) one outcome of the research into Stoke-on-Trent Brownfields included a series of Brownfield Ikebana workshops, and photographic documentation of finished Ikebana using found items and weeds from the sites. Middle and Right: The Blue Italian Border at RHS Tatton and then installed in the Spode Rose Garden, part of an ongoing Garden project for a now public pocket park (collaborative community development project).