All about... transient art

There are benefits to embracing a creativity focused on process rather than result. *Nicole Weinstein* offers a guide

Transient art is a term that has been coined for anything creative or imaginative that doesn't stay put in one place for long. It is not a specific process, technique or methodology, like mark-making, textiles or printing, and it doesn't have origins in a specific period of time. However, it is a wonderfully cheap and easy way to provide children with a rich and stimulating creative experience.

Many practitioners are familiar with transient art in the context of using collections of found materials that children can manipulate, move and change to create two-dimensional flat 'pictures' or three-dimensional constructions or sculptures.

Early years and creative arts consultant Anni McTavish explains, 'It may include beads, sequins and found objects arranged on a small tray, tile, square of mirror or within a picture frame, or it might be using natural materials such as conkers, shells, pebbles and twigs indoors or out. It's also sometimes called "no-glue", "environmental" or "land" art.'

Although it has no specific origins, experts believe that transient art is closely linked to the work of Reggio Emilia with its approach to using natural objects and materials for exploration and discovery, and also, to the use of 'loose parts' in developing children's creative thinking and self-expression (see 'On the loose', Enabling Environments, at ww.nurseryworld.co.uk). Settings are also inspired by artists such as Andy Goldsworthy and Georgia O'Keeffe.

Children at Garswood explored natural materials, using the seeds and pulp of pumpkins to make patterns

ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES

According to Ruth Churchill Dower, director of Earlyarts, a creative teaching and training network, transient art is exciting because it is 'all about the process' and not so much about 'what comes out at the end'.

She continues, 'We love transient art because just like any sort of creativity it enables practitioners to see the deeper meaning and processes that are going on behind what children are doing with their art – it could be working through social emotional issues, they could be building confidence through playing with words, or they could be trying to achieve mastery at something, for example, banging a nail into a piece of wood.

'Above all, it's a massive boost for imagination, which is good for boys because they sometimes want to be task-orientated and know what they need to do first, next and after that. Transient art, because it's process-orientated, is good for them because it forces that part of their brain into gear and encourages them to imagine all sorts of possibilities because there isn't any one product that is expected of them.' ➤

Ms McTavish notes that boys, in particular, often enjoy transient art constructions on a larger scale. She explains, 'Our experience is that if materials are sensory rich and, best of all, it takes place outdoors, then all children's language and communication is nurtured, but this is particularly important for boys.

'We notice that girls are often interested in the finer details and decorations, but both will engage in developing narratives around their work.'

RESOURCES FOR TRANSIENT ART

When deciding what resources to select for transient art activities, practitioners should think about providing open-ended and not predefined materials. For example, choose materials that are a bit unusual and develop their senses – they might be a bit prickly or smelly or rough – and those that give children the opportunity to achieve mastery.

Ms Churchill Dower explains, 'It might be something as simple as making a daisy chain. This is great for children's fine motor skills as they get to try again and again to create the slits to pull the flowers through.'

Ms McTavish likens the resources for transient art to those used in heuristic play.

She says, 'It's a bit like heuristic play for a range of ages, where as well as exploring and discovering, children are also enjoying using materials artistically.'

However, she adds, 'Its success is often down to the materials and the thought put into the provocations – for example, how well these link to children's interests and developmental stages.

'Different materials can be planned to complement each other. For example, indoors, open-ended art materials in a workshop area or no-glue art area might include sequins, beads, stones, shells, pom-poms, different-coloured bottle tops, glass beads and lolly sticks, with table or floor space with either trays, squares of fabric (velvet or silk), or mirror tiles to act as a "canvas".

'Outdoors, a broad range of natural materials organised into labelled baskets keeps things easy. For example, fir cones, large shells, leaves of different shapes and sizes, sticks, conkers, acorns and other objects that you can source easily.'

Transient art is often directed by the children at Garswood (above); Naturally Learning visits the beach every week (right)

Practitioners should think about providing open-ended and not predefined materials

Indoors: some ideas for transient art

- **Light box** Put sand on a light box and project it onto the wall. Encourage children to use their fingers to draw images and shapes into the sand. Or use see-through gels or shapes cut out of coloured cellophane to project onto the wall. Children will enjoy creating something much larger than themselves and they can stand in front of them and make body shapes on the wall.
- **Tissue paper** Put atmospheric music on in the background and encourage children to explore the tissue paper – they can rip it, scrunch it up, poke it, watch how it floats down when they blow it up in the air and make shapes with it. It is great for modelling and children can create vehicles, boats and characters with it. It is a simple material, but it has lots of potential.

CASE STUDY: MOORSIDE COMMUNITY PRIMARY SCHOOL

The early years department at Moorside Community Primary School in Swinton, Greater Manchester, promotes process-art over a prescribed end product.

Lead nursery teacher Nicola Cumberpatch explains, 'Transient art fits really well with this. We are inspired by the work of Reggio Emilia and the use of loose parts in developing children's creative thinking and self-expression.

'We are lucky to have a forest on our school site and nursery and Reception classes visit weekly. The children can often be observed creating pieces of art using natural resources found on the forest floor. We've also created transient art on an overhead projector and light box, adding a different dimension to the children's artwork.

'We like to provide the children with open-ended items that prompt them to look closely at detail – natural resources such as pine cones, leaves and conkers or interesting items such as coloured bottle tops and glass gems, beautiful objects that children just can't resist picking up and sorting, matching and rearranging.

'Indoors, we organise collections of natural resources in baskets for the children to use in their play. Sometimes the children will create at a table on an individual project; other times a group of children will work together on a collaborative project that covers the floor.

'We've used photos of Andy Goldsworthy's work to inspire children to create with transient art in the forest. We have also used a story called *Leaf Man* by Lois Ehlert to inspire transient art in autumn.

'I feel the more opportunity boys and girls have to create with transient art, the more frequently narratives develop to accompany their artwork. It's also great for their mathematical development as they sort and match object and create asymmetric patterns. Because there is no right or wrong way of doing things, it gives children the confidence to have a go.'

- *http://nursery.moorsideprimary.net/page/10*

In a wider sense

Ms Churchill Dower encourages practitioners to think about transient art in a wider sense and to incorporate it in all the art forms. She explains, 'Role play, for example, is transient art in its own right because unless you're filming it, it never stays the same. A lot of practitioners think about physical materials and using resources, but when we think about how important communication is – and language and literacy – and even numbers and understanding, we realise that being able to use our bodies in music, drama and singing is a core part of that.

'At the end of the day, transient art is a vehicle to help children develop their communication skills and understanding and give them a better sense of self and who they are.'

CASE STUDIES

Garswood Primary and Nursery School, Greater Manchester

In the Hobbit Hole area that leads into the woodland, children at Garswood Primary and Nursery School in St Helens, Greater Manchester, gather their natural materials for transient art activities.

Early years leader Sue Bagshaw says, 'In this area there are sycamore and oak trees, grassy areas and wooden logs. It's a magical place with a fairy door carved into one of the trees. To celebrate autumn, we placed some pumpkins into the outdoor area and children transported them to the area we call the Hobbit Hole in crates and on bikes and by rolling them. They worked out how to open them – mainly by dropping them – and we then discussed what was inside. The children used the seeds and the pulp to make beautiful patterns and self-portraits on the tree stumps.

'We've always used lots of natural materials and encouraged pattern-making with leaves, stones, pebbles and petals, but in the past few years, since we've developed our outdoor area and now have a texture kitchen, similar to a mud kitchen with lots of herbs and so many freely-available natural materials at hand, we've noticed that transient art happens so much more naturally now and that it's often directed by the children. We've extended it by taking photos of the children's art.

'Indoors, we have natural baskets and we encourage children to collect natural objects and use them in the workshop and painting area.'

● *www.garswoodprimary.co.uk/page/transient-art/11789*

Naturally Learning, St Austell, Cornwall

Children at Naturally Learning Charlestown, St Austell, one of a chain of three nurseries based in Cornwall, use the beach as a blank canvas to explore their creativity and create transient pieces of artwork.

Tom Richardson, beach and forest school leader, says, 'We take groups of three- to four-year-olds, around eight at a time, to the local beach on a weekly basis. We usually start by making pieces of artwork together. Often we make Mandalas, which are spiritual and ritual symbols in Indian religions, representing the universe. The basic form of this is a series of concentric circles. The children then go in search of natural objects – coloured pebbles, seaweed, worn glass, feathers – and fill the circles with them.

'Another activity that they enjoy is creating rock stacks. They use pebbles to create their own, but we also create large-scale rock stacks the same size as them. The children also like to create self-portraits using seaweed, shells and stones. Whatever we create, we leave on the beach, and families often remark that they found their children's work on the beach a few days later.

'We document all the artwork from the beach and we print it out and talk through what we did with the children. We don't bring back a lot of materials, but we do have a selection of pebbles and shells and children often like to repeat the Mandalas they've made back at the nursery.'

● *www.naturallylearning.co.uk/image-galleries/images-from-the-beach-school*

Rowland Hill Nursery School and Children's Centre, London

At Rowland Hill Nursery School in Haringey, north London, transient art is developed throughout the year in various areas of learning, including the light box, the discovery area, the imaginary area, which includes and an edible garden, the construction area and in maths, literacy and mark-making.

Fiona McRitchie, lead teacher, says, 'We follow the children's lines of enquiry. For example, our outdoor garden area is rich in natural resources including many trees such as eucalyptus and fig, which are unusual in an urban setting. The bark, leaves and fruit provide readily available natural resources, which are used by children in their explorations.

'Parents are involved in sourcing open-ended materials that we use in a variety of contexts. We recently set up an activity exploring autumn natural resources.

'We presented the provocation in a beautiful and stimulating way, ➤

as this encourages children's involvement. It was set up on a large wooden table and children were free to choose the natural materials – conkers, leaves, pine cones, bark, fruits and autumn squashes – and place them on a sheet of paper.

'This form of transient art was about placing and arranging, making patterns, grouping colours together, feeling textures, talking and developing vocabulary and exploring maths through counting. Practitioners were on hand to ask questions like, "Tell me about your design?", "What patterns have you made?" and "What does this feel like?"'

The children developed their language skills by using new vocabulary and improved their motivation by maintaining focus on their activity for a period of time.

'This year we plan to extend and celebrate our children's diversity by using objects like diyas and other light sources to support a transient art experience based on Diwali.'

- *http://rowlandhill.haringey.sch.uk*

Pembury House Nursery School and Children's Centre, London

Children at Pembury House Nursery in Tottenham, north London, have opportunities to take part in transient art activities on a daily basis.

To celebrate Black History Month, they recently created jewellery with transient art materials. Alongside a display of African fabrics, musical instruments, artefacts, foodstuffs and books, practitioners arranged a provocation of different transient art materials, inviting the children to create simple jewellery.

With small place mats to define the space, children collected leaves, acorns and a variety of wooden beads. Large, plastic darning needles with wool together with inspiring images of natural jewellery and African adornments were provided and children spent time arranging the materials and, with support, threading the needles and then sewing leaves and giant beads together.

Parents have also been invited to get involved in creating large collaborative pieces of transient art with their children at the setting.

Head teacher Sue Moss explains, 'Parents are invited every week to Wow Wednesdays, where they can share an activity with their children at drop-off time.' During one of the sessions, parents and children enjoyed exploring the transient art materials. Some created artworks side by side and some collaborated.

'It was also a great opportunity to share other links to learning, for example mathematical language, counting and pattern. We follow each session up with a short leaflet explaining links to learning with five simple ideas to try at home.'

Following an ongoing interest in woodwork, and after children recently discovered a split branch blocking a path in the garden, the children spent time problem-solving how to move the branch, and the next day, the outdoor team provided a variety of different lengths of wood and transient materials.

Ms Moss explains, 'We are fortunate to have lots of mature trees and bushes, and with the leaves beginning to change into autumn colours, this provided some fantastic raw materials. We also wanted to extend children's learning by introducing them to well-known artists, so shared some images and photographs of Andy Goldsworthy and his land art.

'In particular, the children enjoyed connecting the bamboo together to act as framework for their sculpture, especially some of the boys, working alongside our practitioner Kyle. They then spent time adding a variety of materials using clothes pegs. The children called it the "Tepee".'

Transient art materials are available indoors in the workshop area as 'no-glue art' and outdoors as part of the continuous provision, where there is there is an area under cover with a selection of different materials – for example, corks, fir cones, and tiles, with a table nearby.

- *http://pemburyhouse.haringey.sch.uk* ■

MORE INFORMATION

- Anni McTavish is an associate of Early Education and author of the forthcoming title, *Expressive Arts and Design in the Early Years*, due to be published by David Fulton. For free resources, visit www.earlyarts.co.uk.
- *The Inspired Child – a creative journey*, by Liz Buckler. A series of six booklets focusing on how to nurture a child's creativity using inexpensive and recycled materials, http://theinspiredchild.co.uk

Rowland Hill children created art with conkers, leaves and pine cones (above); children at Pembury House enjoyed using bamboo as a frame for their sculture