Nature recovery in the air
Community walking as curatorial practice

Lucy Sabin | Research Fellow, University of Sussex | ls763@sussex.ac.uk | ORCiD

This is a preprint of an article published in *TURBA: The Journal for Global Practices in Live Arts Curation*. The version of record is available at: https://doi.org/10.3167/turba.2026.050107.

Suggested citation: Sabin, L. (2026). Nature recovery in the air: Community walking as curatorial practice. *TURBA, 5(1)*, 68-108. https://doi.org/10.3167/turba.2026.050107

I crossed the threshold from suburb into the Lewes Railway Land Nature Reserve. Once a railway yard in Sussex, United Kingdom, the site is now a mosaic of watery habitats fed by chalkland stream. A sign marked the transition, its geometric diagrams announcing that this place is actively shaped through design, stewardship, and care. Spiralling paths led to the Linklater Pavilion: a hexagonal building named after the lawyer who helped preserve this landscape in the 1980s. To my left, the River Ouse; beyond it, housing developments and, beyond them, white cliffs. The low roar of the A27 threaded through birdsong.

Having arrived early, I perched on a wooden bench beside the path. Gradually, my attention shifted, and body settled. Thoughts slowed, or perhaps space opened between them. This change of state was not incidental. It felt invited: by the cold air, the filtered light, the geometry of the paths, the sounds carried across the winter ground. I had come to join a guided "pre-solstice" nature walk led by Ruthie Martin, artist-in-residence with the Railway Land Wildlife Trust, alongside writer-in-residence Ruth Lawrence. What unfolded over the next two hours felt less like a walk from A to B and more like a gradual attunement to the reserve's atmosphere, curated through careful attention to the intermingling of embodied perception with ecological processes.

The Trust runs several community walks each week, facilitated alternately by staff and volunteers. Each walk is unique. When the group gathered (ten of us at first, eventually becoming fourteen) Ruthie introduced the session by drawing our attention to seasonal qualities of light and sound. At this time of year, she explained, light travels sideways; surfaces hold it longer. If colour speaks, the land has a lower register now. Sound, too, behaves differently, travelling longer distances, but more slowly in the dense, chilled air. Footsteps, water, distant traffic seem accentuated. Before setting off, Ruthie offered a simple instruction: we didn't need to name what we encountered. Only to notice.

We moved slowly, stopping often. Attention pooled around small details: the dark blue of water beneath trees, the spiked leaves of butcher's broom signalling ancient woodland. At the remnants of a demolished Regency house, stories blurred with sketches in which walls dissolved into running water. At a footbridge, someone bent to remove a sweet wrapper; suddenly plastic fragments and floating cans became hard to ignore. The mood seemed to alter then, passing from curiosity into collective concern. Our conversations reflected on how porous this place is to wider forces, from pollution to pharmaceuticals entering waterways.

Walking itself became a mode of "attuning" to and co-creating a dynamic atmosphere (Ingold 2010). The rhythm of our steps, the pauses, the exchanges among participants – many of whom had been joining these walks for years – shaped a shared tempo. Knowledge circulated horizontally: someone identified a plant, another recalled peregrine falcons teaching their young to dive along the Cockshut stream. We lamented the absence of cuckoos. Stories surfaced of noticing change across seasons and finding support for mental and physical health within this community. As one participant later remarked, these walks are not about walking as exercise, but about noticing.

In leading the walk, Martin and Lawrence helped “curate” a shared atmosphere by highlighting relations: between bodies, weather, land, memory, and imagination. Poems were recited beside poisonous hemlock; a sketchbook revealed a half-remembered tree spirit glimpsed years earlier; hot chocolate was passed around inside a repurposed signal box now used by the local youth group. The atmosphere of the day was inseparable from its timing: deep winter, a particular configuration of people, light, sound, and movement that will not occur again in quite the same way.

This kind of atmospheric co-curation is part of a broader movement to recognise the arts as integral to ecological care. The Railway Land is not only a nature reserve but a site of community flourishing and creative practice. The River Ouse, which hems the reserve, has recently been recognised as a rights-bearing entity, an acknowledgement that rivers are not merely resources but living systems deserving of legal standing (Lewes & Eastbourne Councils 2025). In this context, artists do not simply interpret nature; they act as conservationists, facilitators, and activists, helping to shift how places are sensed, valued, and imagined (e.g., Chalk & Stream Collective 2024).

What stayed with me after the walk was the sense that processes of ecological restoration have intangible and atmospheric dimensions that are hard to capture or measure. These dimensions are co-created through walking together, through seasonal conditions, through multispecies presence, through stories shared and silences held. To curate an atmosphere, in this sense, is to attend carefully to relations and to invite others into that attentiveness. On that pre-solstice morning, the nature reserve felt momentarily reconfigured: not as scenery, but as a living, breathing commons, held together by shared acts of noticing.

Acknowledgements: This research is part of the EU-funded project *RURALEX: Knowledge in Crisis*, funded by HERA-CHANSE.

Lucy Rose Sabin (she/her) is a researcher and practitioner trained in geography and communication design. Lucy is currently a Research Fellow in the Digital Humanities Lab at the University of Sussex in the UK.

Works Cited

Chalk & Stream Collective. 2024. *Winterbourne Poems.* Lewes: Chalk and Stream Press.

Ingold, Tim. 2010. "Footprints through the weather-world: walking, breathing, knowing." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, 16*: S121-S139.

Lewes & Eastbourne Councils. 2025. "Rights of Rivers: A Charter for the River Ouse (Decision No. 1106)." Lewes & Eastbourne Councils. Accessed on December 18, 2025, at https://democracy.lewes-eastbourne.gov.uk/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?Id=1106