

EXTEND

Keywords: More-than-human, natural force, participatory, environment, collaborate, play, re-frame, re-position.

PROMPT:

With deep investment in a restoration to the land, Anishinabekwe botanist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer works with “Indigenous ways of knowing and scientific knowledge” to develop practices and methodologies that foster a healing relationship between humans and the land. Looking to other species as examples of how to be in the world, she speaks to a certain generosity and reciprocity, reminding settlers that “they’ve been on the earth far longer than we have been, and have had time to figure things out [...] Plants know how to make food and medicine from light and water, and then they give it away.” See Robin Wall Kimmerer. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2015) 18.

Develop co-production method with a more-than-human or natural force. Document through serial photography or a video still sequence.¹

SUPPORT:

Jenny Odell, “The Case for Nothing.” *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2019), 19-25.

Peter Reason, “Time on ecological pilgrimage.” *Participatory Research in More-than-Human Worlds* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017), 69.

Atchison, Jennifer and Lesley Head. “Rethinking ethnobotany? A methodological reflection on human-plant research.” *Participatory Research in More-than-Human Worlds*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017. pp. 160-189. Select sections.

¹ Full video documentation encouraged for future exhibition purposes. Video stills to be used in print publication.

Bas Jan Ader, *Broken Fall (Geometric)* [West Kapelle - Holland], 1971. Artist collaboration with gravity. View full performance series: https://ubu.com/film/ader_selected.html

Yoko Ono, *Painting for the Wind*, 1961. Artist collaboration with wind.

Alec Finlay, *A Variety of Cultures*, 2016. Artist collaboration with plum and apple orchard.

Tomás Saraceno, *Arachnid Orchestra. Jam Sessions*, 2013. Artist collaboration with spiders.

IN THE MIDDLE of this postelection heartbreak and anxiety, I was still looking at birds. Not just any birds, and not even a species, but a few specific individuals. First, it was a couple of black-crowned night herons that reliably perch outside of a KFC in my neighborhood, almost all day and night. If you've never seen one, night herons are stocky compared to other herons. My boyfriend once described them as a cross between a penguin and Paul Giamatti. They have a grumpy stoicism about them, sitting hunched over with their long neck completely hidden away. I sometimes affectionately refer to these birds as "the colonels" (because of their location) or "my precious footballs" (because of their shape).

Without really thinking about it, I modified my path home from the bus to pass by the night herons whenever I could, just to be reassured by their presence. I remember specifically feeling comforted by the presence of these strange birds, like I could look up from the horrifying maelstrom of that day's Twitter and they'd probably be there, unmoving with their formidable beaks and their laser-red eyes. (In fact, I even found them sitting in the same place on 2011 Google Street View, and I have no doubt they were there earlier, but Street View doesn't go back any further.) The KFC is near Lake Merritt, a man-made lake in a completely developed area that, like much of the East Bay and the Peninsula, used to be the type of wetlands that herons and other shorebirds love. Night herons have existed here since before Oakland was a city, holdovers from that marshier time. Knowing this made the KFC night herons begin to seem like ghosts to me, especially at night when the streetlights would make their white bellies glow from below.

One of the reasons the night herons are still here is that, like crows, they don't mind humans, traffic, or the occasional piece of trash for dinner. And indeed, crows were the other birds I had started paying more attention to. I had just finished reading Jennifer Ackerman's *The Genius of Birds* and had learned that crows are incredibly intelligent (in the way that humans measure intelligence, anyway) and can recognize and remember human faces. They have been documented making and using tools in the wild. They can also teach their children who are the "good" and "bad" humans—good being ones who feed them and bad being ones who try to catch them or otherwise displease them. They can hold grudges for years. I'd seen crows all my life, but now I became curious about the ones in my neighborhood.

My apartment has a balcony, so I started leaving a few peanuts out on it for the crows. For a long time the peanuts just stayed there and I felt like a crazy person. And then once in a while I'd notice that one was gone, but I couldn't be sure who took it. Then a couple times I saw a crow come by and swipe one, but it wouldn't stay. And this went on for a while until finally they began hanging out on a telephone wire nearby. One started coming every day around the time that I eat breakfast, sitting exactly where I could see it from the kitchen table, and it would caw to make me come out on the balcony with a peanut. Then one day it brought its kid, which I knew was its kid because the big one would groom the smaller one and because the smaller one had an undeveloped, chicken-like squawk. I named them Crow and Crowson.

I soon discovered that Crow and Crowson preferred it when I threw peanuts off the balcony so they could do fancy dives off the telephone line. They'd do twists, barrel rolls, and loops, which I made slow-motion videos of with the obsessiveness of a proud parent. Sometimes they wouldn't want any more peanuts and would just sit there and stare at me. One time Crowson followed me half way down the street. And frankly, I spent a lot of time staring back at them, to the point that I wondered what the neighbors might think. But again, like the night herons, I found their company com-

forting, somehow extremely so given the circumstances. It was comforting that these essentially wild animals recognized me, that I had some place in their universe, and that even though I had no idea what they did the rest of the day, that they would (and still do) stop by my place every day—that sometimes I can even wave them over from a faraway tree.

Inevitably, I began to wonder what these birds see when they look at me. I assume they just see a human who for some reason pays attention to them. They don't know what my work is, they don't see progress—they just see recurrence, day after day, week after week. And through them, I am able to inhabit that perspective, to see myself as the human animal that I am, and when they fly off, to some extent, I can inhabit that perspective too, noticing the shape of the hill that I live on and where all of the tall trees and good landing spots are. I noticed that some ravens live half in and half out of the Rose Garden, until I realized that there is no "rose garden" to them. These alien animal perspectives on me and our shared world have provided me not only with an escape hatch from contemporary anxiety but also a reminder of my own animality and the animateness of the world I live in. Their flights enable my own literal flights of fancy, recalling a question that one of my favorite authors, David Abram, asks in *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*: "Do we really believe that the human imagination can sustain itself without being startled by other shapes of sentience?"²⁰

Strange as it sounds, this explained my need to go to the Rose Garden after the election. What was missing from that surreal and terrifying torrent of information and virtuality was any regard, any place, for the human animal, situated as she is in time and in a physical environment with other human and nonhuman entities. It turns out that groundedness requires *actual ground*. "Direct sensuous reality," writes Abram, "in all its more-than-human mystery, remains the sole solid touchstone for an experiential world now inundated with electronically generated vistas and engineered pleasures; only in regular contact with the tangible ground and sky can

we learn how to orient and to navigate in the multiple dimensions that now claim us."²¹

When I realized this, I grabbed on to it like a life raft, and I haven't let go. *This* is real. Your eyes reading this text, your hands, your breath, the time of day, the place where you are reading this—these things are real. I'm real too. I am not an avatar, a set of preferences, or some smooth cognitive force; I'm lumpy and porous, I'm an animal, I hurt sometimes, and I'm different one day to the next. I hear, see, and smell things in a world where others also hear, see, and smell me. And it takes a break to remember that: a break to do nothing, to just listen, to remember in the deepest sense *what*, *when*, and *where* we are.

I WANT TO be clear that I'm not actually encouraging anyone to stop doing things completely. In fact, I think that "doing nothing"—in the sense of refusing productivity and stopping to listen—entails an active process of listening that seeks out the effects of racial, environmental, and economic injustice and brings about real change. I consider "doing nothing" both as a kind of deprogramming device and as sustenance for those feeling too disassembled to act meaningfully. On this level, the practice of doing nothing has several tools to offer us when it comes to resisting the attention economy.

The first tool has to do with repair. In such times as these, having recourse to periods of and spaces for "doing nothing" is of utmost importance, because without them we have no way to think, reflect, heal, and sustain ourselves—individually or collectively. There is a kind of nothing that's necessary for, at the end of the day, doing something. When overstimulation has become a fact of life, I suggest that we reimagine #FOMO as #NOMO, the necessity of missing out, or if that bothers you, #NOSMO, the necessity of sometimes missing out.

That's a strategic function of nothing, and in that sense, you could file what I've said so far under the heading of self-care. But if you do, make it "self-care" in the activist sense that Audre Lorde meant it in the 1980s, when she said that "[c]aring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." This is an important distinction to make these days, when the phrase "self-care" is appropriated for commercial ends and risks becoming a cliché. As Gabrielle Moss, author of *Glop: Nontoxic, Expensive Ideas That Will Make You Look Ridiculous and Feel Pretentious* (a book parodying goop, Gwyneth Paltrow's high-priced wellness empire), put it: self-care "is poised to be wrenched away from activists and turned into an excuse to buy an expensive bath oil."²³

The second tool that doing nothing offers us is a sharpened ability to listen. I've already mentioned Deep Listening, but this time I mean it in the broader sense of understanding one another. To do nothing is to hold yourself still so that you can perceive what is actually there. As Gordon Hempton, an acoustic ecologist who records natural soundscapes, put it: "Silence is not the absence of something but the presence of everything."²³ Unfortunately, our constant engagement with the attention economy means that this is something many of us (myself included) may have to relearn. Even with the problem of the filter bubble aside, the platforms that we use to communicate with each other do not encourage listening. Instead they reward shouting and oversimple reaction: of having a "take" after having read a single headline.

I alluded earlier to the problem of speed, but this is also a problem both of listening and of bodies. There is in fact a connection between 1) listening in the Deep Listening, bodily sense, and 2) listening, as in me understanding your perspective. Writing about the circulation of information, Berardi makes a distinction that's especially helpful here, between what he calls connectivity and sensitivity. Connectivity is the rapid circulation of information among compatible units—an example would be an article racking up a bunch of shares very quickly and unthinkingly by like-minded people on Facebook. With connectivity, you either are or are not compatible. Red or blue: check the box. In this transmission of information, the units don't change, nor does the information.

Sensitivity, in contrast, involves a difficult, awkward, ambiguous encounter between two differently shaped bodies that are themselves ambiguous—and this meeting, this sensing, requires and takes place in time. Not only that, due to the effort of sensing, the two entities might come away from the encounter a bit different than they went in. Thinking about sensitivity reminds me of a monthlong artist residency I once attended with two other artists in an extremely remote location in the Sierra Nevada. There wasn't much to do at night, so one of the artists and I would sometimes sit on the roof and watch the sunset. She was Catholic and from the Midwest; I'm sort of the quintessential California atheist. I have really fond memories of the languid, meandering conversations we had up there about science and religion. And what strikes me is that neither of us ever convinced the other—that wasn't the point—but we listened to each other, and we did each come away different, with a more nuanced understanding of the other person's position.

So connectivity is a share or, conversely, a trigger; sensitivity is an in-person conversation, whether pleasant or difficult, or both. Obviously, online platforms favor connectivity, not simply by virtue of being online, but also arguably for profit, since the difference between connectivity and sensitivity is time, and time is money. Again, too expensive.

As the body disappears, so does our ability to empathize. Berardi suggests a link between our senses and our ability to make sense, asking us to "hypothesize the connection between the expansion of the infosphere . . . and the crumbling of the sensory membrane that allows human beings to understand that which cannot be verbalized, that which cannot be reduced to codified signs."²⁴ In the environment of our online platforms, "that which cannot be verbalized" is figured as excess or incompatible, although every in-person encounter teaches us the importance of nonverbal expressions of the body, not to mention the very matter-of-fact presence of the body in front of me.

Jenny Odell, "The Case for Nothing." *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2019), 19–25.

I decide to stay put for a day. It is early in my pilgrimage, I need to settle in, take things gently. The following day it is raining and windy, and I see no point in getting wet and uncomfortable and so stay another night. I devote periods to formal meditation, quietening my mind then opening to the land around me. With the rain spitting and fresher winds rocking the boat, as well as my restless mind, concentration is difficult. In time, however, I am able to really attend to these cliffs. I watch them through the day as the sun moves across the sky, casting shadow in the morning and lighting their peaks with orange in the evening. I notice the details of the streams tumbling down, glimmering where the light catches the falling water. I absorb the contrast between the cottages at the foot and the enormity of the 200–300 metres drop. All this attention provides me with a tiny sense of intimacy, of being in place rather than watching scenery. And I am struck by the contrast between my human impatience, my restlessness to get on, and the simple presence of these cliffs.

Without really thinking about it, I am drawing on a practice of deep participation strongly influenced by the work of the philosopher Henryk Skolimowski, one of the first to articulate the possibility of ‘participatory mind’. He argues that Western persons are conditioned by what he called a ‘Yoga of Objectivity’, a ‘gentle form of lobotomy’ that teaches us that things exist in isolation. To develop a participatory mind we need training exercises: a ‘Yoga of Participation’. This Yoga consists of a series of practices that one can draw on in an encounter with another being. He outlines these as a) preparing one’s consciousness by calming the mind; b) meditating on the form of being of the other; c) reliving its past, its present, its existential dilemmas; d) asking permission to engage with it; e) praying to be allowed to enter into communion; f) in-dwelling in compassionate, empathic terms, exploring what forms of dialogue were possible; and g) withdrawing with thanks and gratitude (Skolimowski 1994, p. 147–164).

The backgrounding of plants: an example from ethnobotany and recent shifts in recognition

The first part of the challenge of considering plants as potential collaborators in research processes is to recognise how profoundly they have been backgrounded in Western thought (Hall 2011). Most of their contribution to our everyday lives goes unnoticed – plants are everywhere but nowhere. Since Aristotle defined animals as those who move and plants as those that do not, this plane of difference has become hierarchical, with animals assumed to be superior beings. The task of undoing such hierarchies and foregrounding the plants, animals, and people in the background, is therefore a call to action shared by participatory research methods and more-than-human research. However, in the long and diverse traditions that have studied human–plant relationships, the dominant research framings have been human oriented.

Ethnobotany provides a prime example as a field which has positioned itself as the science of the relationship between people and plants. Here too we find an orientation toward the human. Somewhat paradoxically, this is arguably strongest in studies of indigenous and non-Western modes of relating to plants. Even where indigenous people may interact with plants in a way that acknowledges their sentience, agency, and/or subjectivity, the dominant *researcher* interest has been in the implications for human sociality (Nolan and Turner 2011). Thus, while ethnobotany has contributed to opening up knowledge of the world beyond dominant Western world views, at the same time, it stands accused of privileging these same knowledge systems through methods which re-articulate the ‘objects’ of study.

The relevance of participatory research?

Here we focus on the production of knowledge and whether, and in what ways, we might centre plants in our research process. We situate our anxieties in the overlapping discussions of plants coproducing research and the explicit and direct consideration of plants as co-creators, or research collaborators.

Participatory research methods on the other hand, place emphasis on shifting from research subject to co-researchers. Here, participants contribute to the building and testing of research concerns in collaboration with academic researchers, as they seek to ‘democratise knowledge production and foster opportunities for those involved’ (Kindon *et al.* 2008, p. 90). Collaboration is an ‘explicit’ orientation throughout the research practice. Researchers within anthropology, for example, have focused on collaboration for a range of reasons, including to ‘engender texts that are more readable, relevant and applicable to local communities’ (Lasiter 2008, p. 73). The insistence in going beyond involvement and/or engagement to focusing on active participation, has a long history, and has been imperative in highlighting both the political right of people to be involved in research as well as their having a say in processes and decision making which may affect them (Borda 2001).



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