



Playing near the LA River. Photograph : Liz Goetz, 2022.

MA TRANS - Art, education, engagement

PLAY IN THAT VOID. ECO-PEDAGOGY

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20 November 2023 by [Marc Herbst](#)

TEXT

I am interested in writing about my performance-based pedagogy in relation to the text-based research that more directly signals its politics. This, in order to highlight important practice-based tensions and signal something about relationships between knowing and teaching in our changing world.

MY CAPACITY FOR WORDS

The academic aspect of my artistic practice/research – the publishing that result from collaborative editorial and research work with the *Journal of Aesthetics & Protest* – stands on its own. The medium of that work with words formally relates to readers that can engage with English

language texts. Much of this written and print work appears to be directly political, based on the themes and signifiers it employs. The work wears its politics through the topics it thematizes on its sleeve and pages. It took me quite some time to realize over the course of twenty years of social movement-adjacent theorizing, that with research that ends up in text you can unambiguously say what you want to say. Critically directed thought and the communication of its results has its effects.

So, for example, through an arts-based research grant I was able to gain critical perspective on the practice-based I was employed to do with asylum seeking children at a refugee settlement home in Leipzig, Germany. Before receiving the grant, I did contract-based work for five years at the home. I was employed to draw and build puppets with these kids who mostly had only a passing interest in these creative activities. I had understood the value of providing carework for these war and climate change refugees, but I couldn't grasp the reason for the artistic work. I was myself a foreigner in this German system, and so I simply followed instructions, kept my questions to myself and earned an adequate income with the work. So the research grant afforded me the time to study and conduct a worker-based inquiry that I published as *Always Coming Home*.¹ The research dug into the meanings ascribed to the work by state funders, experts, and also my fellow employees. A key take-away from the research emerged from dialog with my fellow employees— we all came to independently understand that what matters in the work with possibly traumatized children was the attention to their needs, rather than the need to teach them art. We all found that funding structures that demanded strict accounting and documentation around cultural deliverables were nonsensical and counterproductive to facilitating child development.

I am a co-editor of *Journal of Aesthetics & Protest*, and through the long-term relationship I have with this platform, I've gained some insight into how texts actually relate to practice. It is useful to discuss my work in co-publishing Jay Jordan and Isa Fremeaux' *We are Nature Defending Itself* with Pluto Press that was released in 2021. The book documents their community's social creativity and anti-state resistance activated in order to chart a course different than that opened up by capitalist and extractivist end-time fantasies. The authors write about their experiences defending the Notre-Dame-des-Landes ZAD, their autonomous community near Nantes, France, and their successful efforts to stop an airport's construction. Through the struggle, these ZAD squatters developed a wide popular movement. I authored a forward that cursed those who socially and intellectually conspired with the greedy people who placed our lovely world in this state of ecological emergency. I also penned a cursory analysis of the standing body of those potentially open to supporting such a movement— recognizing that in the many hearts of that body there are half-submerged memories and desires to somehow live differently, to be the witches that the state did not kill.²

AT THE LIMITS OF WHAT CAN BE ARTICULATED

This aspect of the book's forward focuses on the tension between being and becoming. But rather than lending more time to words that articulate themselves elsewhere, I'd like to now turn to how active and creative artistic practice deals with contemporary ecological emergencies in ways I have not yet directly discussed. Actual social practices imbedded in the social realm are in innate relation to social life. That is, they are entangled within the daily practice of being and in their desire to pull being in one direction or other demonstrate the variable limit between thinking how things should be and the actual practice of it. More simply, actual praxis demonstrates the active line between theory and life – where the margins of what we can state as known ways of doing engage the miasma that is actually heterogenous life.

Thus, here I am interested in focusing on an aspect of my artistic practice/research that may not signal its direct connection to politics and ecological work. Some aspects of this work surface as “playtime”. Though it might not seem so, within this work's practice I am interested in developing social competencies, common knowledges and ways of working that don't necessarily flag themselves as contemporary art or climate activism. These projects needn't involve conceptual works in important galleries or informative YouTube videos. I am interested in the engagements that

approximate more mundane spheres of human experience. Climate change matters because it affects how we organize our daily lives, and how we organize our daily lives is largely articulated and maintained socially.

Climate change affects us socially because it is through the social that we create meaning³ and maintain ourselves⁴ beyond what is structurally available. It is through day-to-day conversations and solidarities within ourselves and others that we all manage elements of our changing world. It is through day-to-day behavior that we informally and more formally organize political and social strategies to manage elements of our changing world. The peace of a police state is afforded by the social subservience of its population, as is the quiet of a consumer society– so too is the insurrectionary fervor of either place. And while the social sometimes looks smart when it appears as a chat about how things gotta change, the social is very much also the mundane and elementary. So the social is the sphere where we structurally encounter others as they are... the chosen family you meet every Friday, the co-worker you chat with, the tone in a caregiver when holding a child's hand while crossing the street. So it is the less formalized sphere where routine and habituation occur at the interface of the possibly very personal. So the social is something other than art and literature – which stands out as exemplary. Remember that artists, academics and writers are valued for their stand-alone genius, while the social is where we are comfortable with our relationships because we might disregard our conscious apprehension of them in order to be comfortable. We don't live as geniuses; we live as people who might be half-aware or thoroughly unaware of determining aspects of reality. That we are living through the planned collapse of our known climate is the active demonstration of an active social realm, and an appreciation of the lag between knowledge and practice. Here is the real limit to what genius can articulate. And in strange contradiction, right there is the space where we all actually operate.



Fig. 1 Kids playing at the River of Stuff project I ran with the Los Angeles River Public Arts Project (LARPAP). The River of Stuff was a play-based collaborative project with kids at a public day camp in LA. Together, with guidance of Tongva elders and the support of LARPAP, we built a monument to the LA river's habitat. Photograph: Jenna Didier, 2022.

So, rather than always aiming to express genius, I often try to avoid the bind of stand-alone autonomous artwork. Though nothing is ever actually autonomous, the idea of the autonomous artwork is that its presence articulates its inarticulate beauty or tirelessly monumentalizes its own intellect by managing its every word. Often enough, autonomous artwork is a destination without a map that demonstrates how it arrived there. Often, a problem is that without such a map, good ideas remain good ideas, and are not a demonstration of the social practices that facilitated and scaffolded their arrival. The social sphere – following social signs read between ourselves and the supporting, sensitive, and feeling more-than-human world – is how we got there.

I understand the climate emergency to be a very real thing that will deeply challenge our spiritual, social and nutritional horizons. Definitionally, I operate with an understanding that governmental activity is not social activity – government's reach is limited to forms, the formalizing and the formal.⁵ This is not to dismiss the effects of government activities like building more climate-resilient infrastructure, punishing climate criminals and criminalizing the destruction of our earth. Nor is it to dismiss the remuneration and support for the Global South far more heavily impacted by climate change as meaningful. Nor is this to dismiss the funding of technologies and education that could provide methods to organize more balanced relationships in our earthly ecosystems.

But to rely on governmental activity is to forget the forest for the trees. It is no coincidence that modern art developed in congruence with contemporary governance, both forms manage by reference – they are a monument to meaning. Their effects are judged by the amount of meaningful attention they are afforded. Yes, government has courts and police to a right to violence to enforce attention, while art mostly just has bright lights. But just as art serves to reference to the actually more interesting set of ideas and social forms that generated it, governance serves as a reference to enforce ideals for formal collectivity.

When we are just comfortable enough to let the social play, we play with each other in relation to the governing rules and limits of the game. We exist within or test out and explores ways of relating to all things in the game and the limits of the game itself. We can play by existing in the rules or can find permission between ourselves and others to play with and expand the rules or ignore them all together. Beyond the monumentality of how we are formally governed and the idealized notions that artfully govern how we are, there are the actual cultural and social practices of the day-to-day. The state violence at Cop City in Atlanta, the ZAD, and not to mention the countless climate migrants dying in the Mediterranean and the US boarder demonstrate one of the many governmental failures at addressing climate change. To the extent that there will be governmental failures in responding to climate change, it is here that my Eco-pedagogy exists.



Fig. 2 Play in the course of developing the River of Stuff project I ran with the Los Angeles River Public Arts Project (LARPA). Photograph: Jenna Didier, 2022.

THE SCALES OF OUR ACTUAL ECO-SOCIAL PRACTICE

What do we ask from others? And what are we capable of doing amongst ourselves? Human-caused climate impacts are the results of horrible decisions made by a very few self-interested individuals who govern. Yet the organizational/governmental/logistical/ecological⁶ results of their governing decisions order relations in very certain ways – the ways we generally live. These ways are normalized through generally Western suppositions around social order, value, understandings around neighborliness, community and social responsibility, relations between people and other things. In and beyond the generally Western, is a globe governed by the logic of what artist Brett Bloom and others define as petrocultures.⁷ Bloom, in discussing how petroleum defines our subjectivity, states: “Oil shapes our daily experiences to such a great extent—even more than industrialization does—that we take them as normal and truthful of how the world is, rather than as a condition which is historically circumscribed and will not persist. Oil use gives us a metaphorical, conceptual relationship to the things we do.”⁸

What I am highlighting here is the descriptive void between how we individually and socially act (between ourselves in the particularly minute-to-minute and also in routine ways in particular places), and the massive governmental/logistical choices that have been put in place to structure the particularities of our contemporary lives. One way to conceive of the scope of that void is through Sylvia Wynter's work. Wynter ethico-poetically nominates "Man1" as a species of human being that emerged out of Renaissance Europe and remains subject to its enlightenment and post-enlightenment meaning and relational horizons normalized under Western-secular capitalism. In contradistinction to "Man1", she proposes a "Man2" that emerges out of the climate crisis and a meaningful decolonial process—equally secular but also somehow in more full relation to and beyond the violent histories, sciences and philosophies it is subject.

Another way to conceive this void is through Félix Guattari's *Three Ecologies*. Guattari, a radical psychiatrist and frequent collaborator of philosopher, Gilles Deleuze begins this book by pointing out the scalar void between changing infrastructures and climates and the way we live our lives. In this gap he posits the possibility for a revolution. This is a revolution that "must not be exclusively concerned with visible relations of force on a grand scale, but will also take into account molecular domains of sensibility, intelligence and desire."⁹

The critical-political concerns of Wynter and the psycho-social of Guattari can define the scalar appreciation of my eco-pedagogy. The practice of my eco-pedagogy confidently enters this void guided by these political and psychological concerns. I am interested in engaging in molecular exchanges with others that play with the sensibilities, intellect and desires, where my actions are guided by the hopes of orienting towards the ontological horizons that Wynter points out.¹⁰ The void remains not because I work in a dark empty place, but because I do not know where my work with students will be meaningfully useful. The pedagogical play that I engage in may find expression through the crafting of protest slogans, in settling family disagreements, in a city hall policy discussion, or in setting a routine to manage a precarious life in relationship with others.

ON PLAY

By "play with", this is literally what I mean – my pedagogical activity is grounded by an ethic of play. I critically embrace a playful approach to the very real concerns around how the changing climate and the ongoing legacies of sexism, racism and all this other bad stuff affect our world. To play with something is to appreciate the grace afforded by being between things, rules that are much more stringent and formal. When thinking about play, I am taken by philosopher Reza Negarestani's idealization of the artistic play made possible between the structures through which such play is artistically made visible. In his essay "Contingency and Complicity" Negarestani refers to the properties of and within materials and also the biases and interests of viewers.¹¹ These contingencies are set at play by an active agent, the artist. He thinks about the ecology set up between these materials. I highlight his work here because of its materialist approach to ecology—his is a material art theorists approach to discussing what is possible through entanglement. While many indigenous philosophies, ecological designers¹², Donna Haraway's cthulucene¹³, and Jason W. Moore's *Capitalism in the Web of Life*¹⁴ all work through the realities of entanglement, this essay focuses in minute detail on the nature of what is contingent in between rules.

I enjoy thinking about social play that continually occurs between the rules of legal and cultural orders. I appreciate the infinite but rule-oriented social orders that occur subject to these rules. Within that order sets into play what Negarestani describes as "subtly twisted", and describes as a continuum where "everyday superficiality, horror, reason, comedy, suspense and seamless uneventfulness are all fuzzy gradients."¹⁵

Further, how Negarestani describes how play is set in relationship between the artist (or in this case, the pedagogue) and the rules is instructive. He discusses the creative role of becoming an accomplice in relation to the setting of rules to demonstrate how play helps "uncover itself as (in) the field of experimentation of its contingent materials, as a conspiracy plotted by anonymous

materials.”¹⁶ These are the politics of setting things in play, where the radical play guide (the teacher) is in contingent relation to rules. We can employ rules in a false alliance, towards an instructive utility, as a master-class challenge. Play allows everyone to explore relationships to all kinds of limits over time, and find the play around rules through the varying alliances and relationships. You see, this is all very social, almost promiscuous.

LIFE IN PLAY

In relation to our ways of living socially, culturally and politically through our changing world, I understand that many things are at play. This is the void and the scale, and the inarticulate aspect of practice. This is play with varying but ultimately ecologically systemic reverberation. We learn the true social flexibility of rules between what we and others afford and our decisions are accounted for in ecological response. Ignore the waste generated in some games and recognize that some pollution can kill fish. The social and more-than-human feedback to our many games’ reliance on oil is demonstrated by the sad accounting all around us. But to whatever extent, we can find play in our relations, at both molecular or macro-level. We learn to deal with sadness, with anger, with impossible situations with the help of one another, socially and culturally. I am taken here by Michel Foucault’s (1991) description of life and its relation to its varying rules – that life continues in relation to itself and its environment under any term, until it no longer is alive. That is, the terms for life continue in varying relationship to its environment through eventually wrong choices until there is no longer anything at play, at the point of death. Errors, because we all eventually die, regardless. Or as Foucault succinctly states it, “Life is what is capable of error.”¹⁷

That we all make mistakes is a part of the breath of air I appreciate in play.

Within pedagogical exchanges, this looks like simple play between myself and others, or in games that I introduce to people. I have recently set up a lot of play in playgrounds and refugee settlement houses, but also in university classrooms, dance and performance spaces and galleries. Each context, through the nature of their setting establishes certain rules. Many common-sense social and cultural rules can be utilized and explored by opening them up to participants. One simple game for teenagers and older called “how close?”¹⁸ involves having the group break down into random partners that stand across from each other, and then without speaking feel out the appropriate distance that feels most comfortable. This game would be different if one player is nominated as an authority, the other a victim of violence, or if each pair were out of collective view. Here mental ecologies of comfort and social ecologies of appropriateness are at play. What comes into play are gender norms, personal psychologies, sexuality, and our varying degrees of comfort and discomfort with randomly chosen partners in an open and public settings. Other games I’ve set up involve having pairs mirror one another, showing in really dynamic ways how we develop ideas through mirroring, reflecting and playing. These game, like many others is pedagogically oriented towards moving participants towards an awareness of how they are relationally entangled in the world¹⁹, that relations determine how we are and act. Playing these games builds social competence, an awareness that relationship can actively vary, and that we can have a choice in how we act.

By engaging with relational play in innately politicized scenarios, we can play with our reactions in a non-polarized manner. Appreciating that as a pedagogue, my students are learning rather than fixed subjects with right and wrong ideas.²⁰ To be clear, I’ve asked 7-year-olds to play through the flooding of banks and museums and the collapse of the Los Angeles Highway system. Eco-socially, I am interested in play to the extent that learners are able to explore conceptual relational scenarios. Within limits of course, I have no problem explaining my ideals. But a key element to play work is what starts out as its constitution as a non-judgmental space. Here is where I return to the introduction of my essay- I am interested in practices that appear to be mundane, as seamless with the play of the everyday until it doesn’t. Games about the collapse of a highway are just games we are involved in, though artwork about this allows conceptual

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distance. Our world is changing, and these scenarios are not conceptual, even though they currently might appear that way. Because of the novelty of this situation, to the extent possible I embrace risk-taking in place, guided by feminist and queer-informed “braver spaces” concepts.²¹

In that we are all teaching in our changing world, our relationship to knowledge and practice and therefor pedagogy might change. The promise of the Anthropocene is that the stability through which we were disciplined to live in steady habits and patterns are gone, and as Guattari and others argue, what we have left are relational forms that nevertheless remain meaningful. I have been collaborating with artist Michelle Teran²² to develop ways of dreaming together through our changing world within formal education institutions. One thing we look at is what it means to teach in a time when because of changes in life’s horizons, what was once meaningful becomes meaningless. Infrastructures and scales of power that the youth and students are able to survey are either collapsing, unreachable or uneven, and their experiences of these voids differ greatly. In our work, I understand that it is important to keep in mind ethics of our individual actions in the mental, social and environmental and political entanglements. Nevertheless, I also understand that it might be a good idea to decenter the relationship between knowing and teaching, that what playing through learning offers is a chance to orient learning not through right and wrong of laws and ideas, but rather as a field of collectively working through the entanglement of material and psychological, cultural and social affects that construct our relationship to the world. With lightness and joy, informed by the seriousness of the situation.



Fig. 3 A child-made drawing done during a workshop. Photograph: Louise Wonneberger, 2018.

Notes

1. Marc Herbst, *Always Coming Home*, Leipzig: Journal of Aesthetics & Protest Press, 2023, available at <https://joaap.org/displacement/> (last accessed 26.10.2023). ↵
2. “When drafting a timeline of radical otherness’ continuity in the shadows of the man and his guns and money, so much floods in that it reveals the conceptual limits of cultural hegemony. ‘We truly are the granddaughters of the witches you weren’t able to burn’. Cultural practices, knowledges and perspectives remain entangled within lives that would otherwise simply seem subject to capitalism’s world-ordering. Relational threads are entangled within the everyday of common being, properly invoking the tangles and knots is the recipe for radical transformation.” Marc Herbst, “Preface”, 2021, available at <https://joaap.org/press/wandi/WANDI.htm> (last accessed on 30 October 2023). An altered version of this preface appears in the print and ebook edition of Isa Fremeaux and Jay Jordan, *We Are Nature Defending Itself*, London: Pluto Press and Journal of Aesthetics & Protest, 2021. ↵
3. My go-to text source here is Andreas Weber, *Enlèvement: Toward a Poetics for the*

Anthropocene, Cambridge (Massachusetts): MIT Press, 2019. ↵

4. One of my basic go-to's here are feminist economists. ↵
5. Within this essay the understanding is that art, because it is defined by its stand-alone genius, is not social, it is governmental. ↵
6. One can insert here any number of very angry and left-populist texts, and any number of books authored by whales, squirrels, dolphins, sharks, chickadees, orchids, ash trees, etc. ↵
7. For more on the topic of petroculture, I'd check out Imre Szeman, *On Petrocultures: Globalization, Culture, Energy*, Wheeling: West Virginia University Press, 2019. ↵
8. Brett Bloom, *Petro-Subjectivity*, Fort Wayne: Breakdown Break Down Press, 2015, p. 15. ↵
9. Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, London: The Athlone Press, 2000, p. 28. ↵
10. Katherine McKittrick, Sylvia Wynter: *On Being Human as Praxis*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2015. ↵
11. Reza Negarestani, "Contingency and Complicity", in Robin MacKay (ed.), *The Medium of Contingency*, Windsor Quarry: Urbanomic, 2011, p. 11-17. ↵
12. I am primarily thinking of Arturo Escobar's work here. See for example, *Designs for the Pluriverse*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. ↵
13. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. ↵
14. Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, London: Verso Press, 2015. ↵
15. Reza Negarestani, *op. cit.*, p. 16. ↵
16. Ibid. ↵
17. Michel Foucault, "Introduction", in Georges Canguilhem, *The normal and the pathological*, New York: Zone Books, 1991, p. 22. ↵
18. This is an exercise I learned from dancer and therapist Ali Schwartz and the Polymora dance collective. ↵
19. "Trying to experience the world and ourselves in it as metabolism gives us one way of recalibrating our existence—away from separability and toward entanglement." (Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*, Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2021, p. 224) ↵
20. Important to me here is Sarah Schulman, *Conflict is Not Abuse*, Vancouver, British Columbia: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2016. ↵
21. Here I am thankful for practice-based experiences through the Leipzig Consent-Jam, the work of Nicole Bindler, and dialogues with my frequent collaborator Michelle Teran. Also important here is adrienne maree brown's work. ↵
22. Over the course of our collaboration, Michelle Teran has brought many excellent references to our work. In this period, among many books she had Vanessa Machado de Oliveira's in hand (*op. cit.*). Retrospectively, I really appreciated that she brought Walter D. Mignolo's article to the table as well ("Delinking: The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality", *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2007, p. 449–513). ↵

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