

Art and Social Ecology

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Dear reader,

Often journeys turn out very different to how you thought they would be. This has for me been one of those journeys.

I have found it frustrating because exploring place from a theoretical perspective is like running in a labyrinth where every direction leads to some unresolved dilemma. In addition I feel that theory is born from inside a given framework to deal with a certain aspect of the structural problems arising within that framework. It is like humans have this tremendous need to make sense through the process of analyzing - through deconstruction rather than experiencing connectedness. Through theory we have, in my opinion, also lost the ability to trust our own senses and make sense out of reality. We become blind to the answers that lie in the landscape and the universe we are integral to and we believe that the answers are to be found only through our thinking - or through other peoples thinking. We end up interpreting what we see through theories, turning them and putting one theory next to another to compare them. It all becomes a virtual reality where forms exist outside of our genuine experience and therefore become secondary to our understanding. To me it does not make sense because we have forgotten to use our senses.

When I set out on this journey I was intending to attempt a critical enquiry into the social complexities of place drawing upon methodologies and contemporary critical theory. I could only do this by trying to ignore my own sense of wholeness and deconstruct my perception. Hence what to me was clear at the beginning got more and more confused and frustrating as I was trying to take my sense apart in order to look at each fragment separately. I got lost and found it hard to glue the pieces back together again. What I am trying to say can only be experienced as a whole. That is why I am an artist. For me, the words themselves are fragmented I cannot sculpt them to convey what I see and feel.

I think that the problems we have today are due to our inability of trusting our own senses and experience how everything is connected and how this must be experienced in order to make sense. As I see it this is fundamental to any complex system and an unavoidable issue when dealing with methodology. In the pages to follow I am meandering into three main fields which to me are connected and all part of the same journey.

I wonder and wander from different perceptions of space where I briefly look at our lack of seeing beyond our given framework because our views are fixed on objects and subjects rather than the spaces in between. This leads me into the part of the road where we get stuck. I call this "roadblocks". This is where we stumble in thoughts and think our thoughts are going to free us. I propose that it is not thought itself but the way we think and come to knowing which is our problem and that, through experience rather than thinking, we can find new ways of connecting with each other, and the rest of our earth. I think it is in the core of creativity where change takes place, so I propose this as a way of

transforming our perception. I believe art has a very important role as a catalyst for change and look at different artists approach to change, including my own. My conclusion is returning to the beginning of my journey where departure from wholeness only can end up in getting tangled and fragmented, as becomes evident in this story.

RESHAPING PERCEPTION

One could argue that you learn new aspects and go deeper into a substance through analysing by looking at each bit separately. After all, this is the process we have developed and perfected in the western world since the Renaissance with proponents like Descartes, Bacon and Darwin and Newton. This is the hegemony that has since dominated this planet regardless of what other ways of viewing the world was there before. This world view has created our thoughts, the standards of our education, our way of conducting our business, the way we interact (manage and use) with our lands and treat our fellow neighbours and other animals. It has shaped our languages and our souls. This way of thinking separates us from our surroundings and makes us blind to "the spaces in between". I suggest that we perceive the world as a form of "optical illusion" where there are other multi-layered dimensions of place, space and time that our Western European industrial culture are not capable of experiencing with our current perception. Is it possible that our current ecological crisis is due to the way we perceive the world through the process of thinking and knowing?

Spaces in between Emmentaler cheese and new world views



When I was a child I sometimes had this peculiar feeling just before going to sleep. It was if my body disintegrated and was replaced with something resembling Emmentaler - the Swiss cheese with big holes that looks like an entire family of mice have had their breakfast in it. As I grew older the sensation went away, but I have often recalled the feeling. There is a sense of lightness there but also of solidness. The

holes are integral parts of the cheese and I have come to realise that they are, in fact, the spaces in between that make up the whole. The gaps are vital - after all an Emmentaler wouldn't be **it** without the holes so therefore the holes are just as important as the substance. Just because they are spaces in between substance they are so easily ignored.

I recognize that this is comparable to the spatial relationship of the universe as experienced by the Aborigines of Australia. As we focus on the stars themselves we are consciously unaware of the space in between them. The Aborigines view the sky itself - the spaces between the stars. When you look at the night sky from that perspective it becomes unified. The spaces in between become integral to the whole.

This also makes me think of our predominant languages where the objects, the nouns, serve the same function in our perception as the stars.

As the physicist David Peat explains:

*"Because our language works in terms of nouns, so what we tend to see is a world of objects and interactions. And because we have a noun-based language we also tend to see categories and concepts, and to put things in categories. So a certain way of thinking, a certain logic, follows from the languages that we speak. But some Native American groups don't have those sorts of languages, as a result of which they don't have the idea of categories to put things in, and they don't come up with the sorts of problems that we do. There's a kind of liberation in that, you see: by looking at their world and coming back to mine I see my experience of the world as culturally conditioned rather than inevitable; I see that there could be other ways of looking at it."*¹

Other physicists have also struggled with the limiting perspectives of language. Niels Bohr insisted that the problem of understanding quantum theory was due to our language that limits the way we think and talk.²

David Bohm found English so limiting that he even invented a new language, "Rheomode", based upon processes and activity, transformation and change rather than on the interaction of stable objects. According to David Peat, who was a good friend and colleague of his, on becoming familiar with the language of Algonian:

*"What Bohm had been a major breakthrough in human thought - quantum theory, relativity, his implicate order and Rheomode, were part of the everyday life and speech of the Blackfoot, MicMaq, Cree and Ojibaj."*³

We discover that our perception is dependent on our understanding and our understanding is dependent on our language and our language is based upon our perception which in our predominant culture is dependent on thought.

¹ David Peat interviewed by Simeon Alev in "What is Enlightenment?"
Spring/Summer 1997, Volume 6, Number 1

² De Quincey: Radical nature page 54

³ David Peat "Blackfoot Physics", p. 238

Thinking as roadblocks

Humans create systems of thoughts for understanding our behaviour and advocating change. The systems crumble and we create other systems to understand aspects of relationships, but the theories themselves are also caught up in conflicts. They become recipes for understanding and for problem-solving, but the problem is that the theories are part of the very system that created the problems in the first place. Theories derive from human thought and since we are all caught up in our prevailing system of thinking, thoughts are not going to be helpful in changing our way of thinking. The thinking does not change anything because thinking cannot change thinking.

As Davis Bohm argues:

"What is the source of all this trouble? I'm saying that the source is basically in thought. Many people would think that such a statement is crazy, because thought is the one thing we have with which to solve our problems. That's part of our tradition. Yet it looks as if the thing we use to solve our problems with is the source of our problems. It's like going to the doctor and having him make you ill. In fact, in 20% of medical cases we do apparently have that going on. But in the case of thought, it's far over 20%".⁴

How can this be? Is it not through thinking that new theories and ideas are generated? Is it not through thinking and reading about other clever thinkers and their ways of finding solutions to our problems that change happens?

Our thinking is not static - it is very slowly moving us from Cartesian fragmentation to a growing understanding of ecology and how everything is linked with everything else. It has gradually taken us from the rejection of our souls to an acceptance that there is a link between inside and outside. It has taken us to look at gender issues, recognising problems with hierarchy and given us new models for understanding connections between systems.

Ok, maybe it is a bit confusing to blame the thinking itself. Rejecting thought is like rejecting breathing. Maybe it is something in **the way** we come to think and the way we come to knowing - **the method**. This question goes to the very core of our beings and of our predominant Western culture where a certain way of thinking, or coming to knowing, has been the only accepted way, as David Peat notes:

"A particular way of seeing ... becomes the truth and other peoples truths become myths, legends, superstitions and fairy stories. It is all in the seeing - the looking - the ways of coming to knowing... It is not the questions themselves that are the problem, but the whole persistent desire to obtain knowledge through a particular analytical route...There are times when it is better to listen than to ask,

⁴ David Bohm: "Thought as a System, P. 18-19

to feel than to think...Western education predisposes us to think of knowledge in terms of factual information that can be structured and passed on through books, lectures and programmed courses. Knowledge is seen as something that can be acquired and accumulated, rather like stocks and bonds. By contrast, within the Indigenous world the act of coming to knowing involves a personal transformation. The knower and the known are indissolvably linked and changed in a fundamental way. A living process."⁵

What Peat describes here is a way of coming to knowing as a transformative journey. How does that differ from our ways of thinking?

Thinking creates reaction

Going into the very core of thinking I ask myself: If I have a problem in life and try to find a way out of that problem and apply thought, I get tangled into a maze of possibilities based upon rationality. Should or shouldn't, this and that, high and low, left and right. The process of fragmentation happens instantly. It creates an unstoppable stream of fragmented arguments. Eventually I have to reach a conclusion and make a choice based on this thinking. Sometimes it is a right choice, and sometimes you realise that you made the wrong decisions. You can then make a new choice based on new knowledge, new thinking, that brings you in a different direction and so on. It appears like that is how our society changes: From socialism via chaos to capitalism, or from religious totalitarianism to renaissance. Thinking creates action and reaction.

It is like we, through thinking, have disconnected the other senses and only trust this only way of coming to knowing and leading our ways of initiating action.

Bohm claims that the system of thought, the pool of human knowledge, has become infected which has created a "systemic fault". Since thought has created the system it is therefore impossible to solve it by thought because it is part of the system itself. Only by going to the generative source, he claims, may the problems of humanity be resolved in radically new ways. Attending to particular problems, while clearly necessary, will not significantly affect the conflicts and challenges we face today.⁶

So where is the generative source David Bohm talks about? Is it in our thoughts or is it in creation itself? Is it possible to learn a new way of thinking though carefully attending to the process of creation in nature?

⁵ David Peat "Blackfoot Physics", p.5 and 46

⁶ David Bohm: The Essential, p 261

Coming to knowing as creation.

*"Everywhere, discrete elements come together, cohere, and make new forms. We know one form of this attraction is gravity. No one knows what gravity is, but it is a behaviour that permeates the universe. This behaviour is ubiquitous attraction. Attraction has created the universe as we know."*⁷

To generate is to bring something into existence - which is to create. What is then the source of creation? Religion believe they have the answer to that and science believe they have another answer.

When nature creates it always does it with the principles of minimal energy and maximum grace, just like the community of bees that transform nectar and pollen into wax and honey through perfect balance of energy and with uttermost elegance.

Our predominant world-view divides the creation of nature and culture into non-intentional and intentional creation. Intentional creation implies that feelings and consciousness is present and for 500 years we have been led to believe that only humans could create with intention. New physics and biology are now seeing qualities, feelings and consciousness as inherent in both natural and cultural creation. Scientists are coming to realize that even molecules have feelings. Brian Goodwin talks about the "feel good factor" when two substances meet and get attracted to each other.

Attraction is ubiquitous and attraction leads to creation - so it is possible to say that attraction facilitates action and action leads to reaction like I described the process of thought earlier? Is it here then possible to see the missing link? Attraction is sensing and even in the meeting of two simple organisms their fusion and transformation is dependent on sensing. Is it not then obvious that feeling has to come before thought and that without feeling the wrong connections are bound to happen?

Art as catalysts for change

If we accept the fact that thought has got stuck, we have to find other ways out of our gridlock. Art can be a catalyst for new perceptions because it has the freedom to operate outside of our framework. Witnessing art can thus open doors to new perspectives, ask questions and alter conditions for new forms to arise. Art can be the catalyst for change through creating turbulence in the system or embodying and expressing a passion and a deep connection with the rhizomatic web of life.

⁷ Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner Rogers: A Simpler Way p.30

In many ways western art has fallen into the same trap as science where thought, control and calculation have replaced the direct experience, reverence and playfulness. Beuys claimed that a lot of conceptual art is based upon a slavish imitation of a scientific approach, just like traditional scientific concepts. This removes the soul from the art by reducing it to a material object where the meaning is projected through reasoning - devoid of feeling or intuition. This is also the current criticism of science coming from proponents of alternative world-views like Capra, DeQuincey, Bortoft and others. They maintain that the methodology has to change from object analyzing to observing the relationships and accepting the



Untitled, painting by Karl and Lorraine Davis

limits of reason and thought by including intuition and feeling. This brings us back to the limitation of thought and other ways of coming to knowing. What is interesting to observe is that art coming from indigenous cultures doesn't seem to have the same need for being outside the framework and can operate freely within, and can therefore give us a unique insight to other perspectives or perhaps a connection to a perception that we lost a long time ago. It do not intend to make general statements about art from an entire continent, but it seems to me that many Australian Aboriginal artists have the unique ability to communicate the voice of the land and its surrounding space in a multi-dimensional dynamic that somehow gives you four perspectives simultaneously. You lose sense of time, inside-outside and macro and micro merges. I also think it is very inspiring to know that many of these paintings are done collaboratively, and that they based on stories that have been alive for 40.000 years. Our art and science also tells stories, but we think that we have to invent a new story every time.

Joseph Beuys and Bill Viola

- Transformation of human thinking and soul activism

Joseph Beuys was mainly concerned with the reconnection of humans to the natural world, what he defined as a change from a destructive to a creative attitude to life.

“ Thus, every Beuys performance involves an “alchemical” transformation; and introspectively enacted and materially symbolised healing process.”⁸ He frequently used natural substances like fat or wax that have inherent symbolic values as well as the ability to visibly transform through the altering conditions of heat. His mission was to “**warm the unwarmable**” and thereby facilitate change in humanity. By proposing that “Everyone is an artist” he gave everyone an equal chance of developing their creative potential and evoke changes, not just on the personal level but in society as a whole. Beuys was passionate about transforming. He fundamentally believed that art could transform the way humans think and therefore behave by changing the form and expanding our connections. His art had no limits and he did not just define himself to objects, galleries or preaching to the already converted. For me, that limitless passion coupled with his deep engagement in the often invisible process of change is a huge inspiration.

Bill Viola uses a very different way of dealing with a similar mission of facilitating change. In the documentary “Eye of the heart” he describes a turning point in his artistic career where he changed from making art that could be classified as **political social activism** to **soul activism**. His films returns to the recurring question of life and death, the observer and the observed and process of transformation through careful observation and juxtaposition of images that reverberates the senses long after the visual impact has left the retina. Like Beuys, he uses metaphors and symbols to evoke feelings and a deep connection with timeless history and language. I find his work very powerful and expanding in the delicate way he works with imagery and his use of sound and silence to connect the senses beyond the visual.

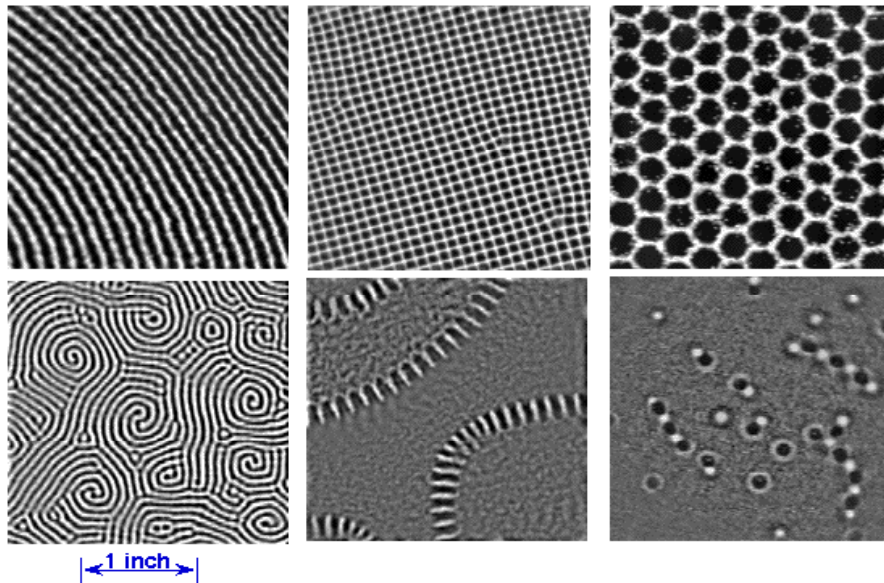
My own work

In my previous work I have also explored the process of change; In the film “Becoming” I observed the dynamics of constant change in a particular spot of the river Dart whilst in the film “Through” clouds are moving and being absorbed by ink swirling in water that transforms into another cloud that eventually disappears into a blue sky. These are the poetics of change.

In another ongoing exploration I am experimenting with applying sound frequencies to water, which then creates patterns that holds its shape for a short period of time to transform into another shape. This transformation is then made visible through light projected onto the surface of the water and reflected onto the walls.

Paul Umbanhowar, an American physicist, also works with this process to explore what happens to an “organisation” of granular material when exposed to sound frequencies. He has observed that when materials like sand, copper balls, or glass particles are vertically vibrated they form patterns and waves that are sustained for infinite amounts of time. At low frequencies honeycomb and checkerboard-like patterns can be seen and at other frequencies the vibrating

⁸ Joseph Beuys: Diverging Critiques, p 38.



matter form patterns of stripes and hexagons. At higher frequencies he has observed the formation of lines and waves.

In his research as well as my explorations of sound and water the conditions, or "interaction", has been the alteration of sound frequency. The form is transformed through exposure to sound. Sound is therefore a condition. Through observing the processes of change occurring in complex organisations of matter and looking at different ways of altering the conditions to enable a transformation to occur I can explore change and visually communicate the process to facilitate new perspectives.

Everything flows and nothing is left (unchanged), or
 Everything flows and nothing stands still, or
 All things are in motion and nothing remains still.
 (Heraclitus)

Epilogue

I embrace those who try and reconnect us with consciousness: Capra, de Quincey, Harding and Bortoft and all the other scientists who dare go outside the existing theoretical framework to find new answers through experiencing consciousness in all matter, Arne Næss and others through the Deep ecology movement who are linking our soul to the soul of nature. David Bohm and Krishnamurti for revealing the problems with thought and all the artists that have stayed connected and tried to connect others through their work like Beuys, Viola, Rilke, Blake, Rumi and so many others who have kept us awake, heightened our consciousness and raised our awareness.

The paradox of all these theories is that they seem to gradually come to the same realisations that indigenous cultures still embody and never left, a knowledge derived from connection and experience. I am deeply grateful that we have not eradicated all that wisdom in our ignorant battles. If we only stopped to listen instead of searching we would not have got ourselves into this mess we are facing now. It is about time we take them seriously.

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Practical work during module 3, Art and Social Ecology:

This module has been a journey of island hopping where each place have offered interesting aspects but where it sometimes has been hard to navigate and see the links between the islands. I have explored new places and spaces as well as returning to some of my previous places in new ways. It has been a very different journey to the last module. From exploring a path of "no thinking" I have this time got "lost in thought".

Marina Abramovic once said in an interview that she realized that all her work was about different ways of dealing with the same question of how to transform your body. If I was to ask myself the same question my work investigates the process of transformations in any substance or systems. I am interested in what happens in the moment of transformation and the process of constant change and also how my art can work as a catalyst for change.

I always find myself returning to the point where change takes place - to the force of attraction.

In this module my "island-hopping" has taken me to explore:

- The bee community as a complex system and a hive of transformation
- Revisit my bread-film and start the process of organising a bread-festival.
- Exploring place through "orange experiences" by inviting guests in my orange silk tent.
- "Glimpse" - a short film of a different perspective of Haldon forest in collaboration with Helen Pattinson - shown at the one-day show on the 19th of may.
- Studying and exploring the social and cultural change that took place in Florence with the renaissance - one week in Florence.
- The process of fermentation as a process for change - research and a filmed conversation with Brian Goodwin.

The last two areas of research - the renaissance and fermentation - have not resulted in concrete work but have been essential parts of the journey. It is essential to go to the beginning of energy production to trace culture and also vital to revisit the renaissance to further my understanding of how we have arrived to where we are now - for good and for bad. Only by understanding the underlying forces that shaped the fundamental change of our society in Florence is it possible to understand how to change now.