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The Best Dancer Is Also a Farmer: A Conversation around Art, Life and Learning

> *When asked what makes a good dancer, the master replied:*
> *First to be a good dancer one must know the music as well as the dance.*
> *And what else?*
> *To be a better dancer, one must understand the stories and be able to interpret the characters being portrayed.*
> *Is there more?*
> *The best dancer is the one who has all those things I have told you about and is also a farmer.*
>
> —Javanese Proverb

JDLR I wanted to start off this conversation with that proverb because it reminds me of a story Thích Nhất Hạnh tells about a woman who approached him while he was gardening at Plum Village. She told him that since he is such an incredible writer and teacher, he should not be wasting his time in the garden, and he replied that one is only possible with the other. Can you two talk about some of the things that you both do that might seem to be a waste of time, but are truly what make your art practices possible.

DB I love this proverb and this story. I have come to know for certain that very specialized practices, like growing food or learning to keep bees, are portals into whole other worlds. Years ago I made a piece called *Italian Lessons* (2011), where I attempted to acquire Italian language skills by learning all kinds of non-stereotypically Italian things—in Italian. I studied beekeeping and made myself memorize lists of terms like *apiary, varroa, brood, drones, neonicotinoids,* and *alarm pheromones* in Italian in order to communicate with the Sicilian beekeepers I was working with. It didn't take long in this practice to realize that by learning the language of beekeeping, I was able to talk about many, many subjects in Italian—like food, agriculture, pollution, population control, the monarchy, democratic decision-making, sex and dancing!

And of course, this expanded range of knowledge isn't limited to words. Practising farming or beekeeping creates intelligence in the body—a unique choreography of caring about things in the world, which is essential to art making.

AM I agree with Diane here, in that learning something as defined as beekeeping, or dancing, or art history are gateways into contexts where what we learn is more vast and complex than how these practices are defined. The context in which education occurs—how and where it is delivered, the relationships through which it is made meaningful—is more important than its content.

I like to take students outside as a course of habit. Although I often craft assignments to respond to places we visit, these adventures are opportunities to develop ongoing relationships to these places. Last winter the Humber River, which flows through the West End of Toronto, froze solid for more than a month. I was teaching a publishing class in the evening, in a classroom with bad lighting, a noisy radiator and an AV system that constantly emitted a headache-inducing buzz. So we went on field trips as often as possible. For one of the first classes, we took the subway across town and went on a walk on the frozen river. As we wound our way through its marshes, the stars appeared and we heard coyotes yipping and howling in the woods. For a while it felt as if the city completely disappeared. Over the rest of the semester, the class researched the river and other waterways in the city and made a magazine about water that included students' personal narratives and artworks about urban waterways. In the spring we held a launch for our publication on the banks of the river, where we had walked in January.

JDLR The idea of taking students outside as a course of habit I can read in two ways: literally taking them outside, but also taking them outside of their own personal course of habit and seeing the ways that can open things up.

From 2008 to 2015, I co-directed the MFA in Art and Social Practice at Portland State University. The program was in many ways experimental in form, and we definitely spent a lot of our time doing things that did not appear to be art making. We tried to incorporate physical activities like hiking, yoga and basketball. We often made and shared meals together. Students were encouraged to deeply follow their own educational paths in the program and share their enthusiasm, work and research with us, often experientially through field trips. One of my favorite memories of the program is of a mushroom foray that was led by one of the students. On a grey and foggy Pacific Northwest afternoon, we set out on a hike together as a class. It was a slow meditation in careful looking. We talked about foraging and Euell Gibbons, author of *Stalking the Good Life: My Love Affair with Nature*. We took our findings back to one student's house and talked about proper identification and testing, and then we made a mushroom omelette (not proper mushroom testing protocol!).

DB Definitely not recommended to identify your mushroom species by making an omelette!

JDLR Some of my favourite parts of the experience were the stories shared casually while walking, getting to know each other and the Portland landscape a little better. The form the program took was very much in response to what we all collectively wanted to do. I know that both of you also conduct your teaching with unorthodox forms and approaches. Can you share how you both came to some of these?

AM For me, there has been a certain amount of play and experimentation with artists. For instance, a few years ago I got into running as a way to combine commuting with exercise, but also as a time to think. I would often take notes when I was out and began to think of the body as a kind of research instrument. I would plan routes carefully, and on the weekends, I would organize adventures with artists who liked to run. One of the things we did was look for corridors of nature within the city. Eventually we mapped out a fifty-five-kilometre-long route across the city, in ravines, parks and clandestine trails. It followed brooks and above-ground storm drains, passed under highways and high-tension power lines and cut through former industrial areas and golf courses. We created an event called *The Epic Ravine Marathon* and shared it on social media, but then it got picked up by the press and about fifty people showed up and participated in various legs of the trip. Because the route was difficult to follow, and we had an extremely varied group of runners in terms of physical ability, I made sure we never left anyone behind. It took nine hours in total, and only two of us made it entirely from start to finish.

For me, this practice arises from being interested in knowing the spaces in between things. I have a deep desire to physically connect places with my body, not just by car or by airplane. For instance, I've ridden my bicycle between all of the places where I've lived for significant periods; between Cape Breton Island, where I am from, eastern Pennsylvania, where I went to school as a teenager, and Toronto, where I've also lived for much of the past twenty-five years. I've been consciously doing this since I was about fifteen as a way to counter how we experience space in ways that are increasingly abstract and disembodied, especially by global air travel and more recently by virtual platforms for communication. The spaces between places often become areas for resource extraction or are otherwise sacrificed—whether through factories, big-box stores, landfills or industrial monoculture farms—to support our way of life. I also see these activities as a way to experience time differently, as being embodied, intrinsic to our relationships with places, to elemental forces and to other beings.

DB Some of our methods have developed through participating in and leading mushroom forays. We both joined the Mycological Society of Toronto in about 2007, and after foraying with them for a few years, we invited members of the society to where Amish is from in Cape Breton, where most summers there is a tremendous abundance and variety of mushrooms, but most people know only a few easily identified species. We organized several forays and advertised them in the local newspaper. About six of the most knowledgeable and enthusiastic mushroomers came from Toronto, and about thirty people showed up from across the island. The event brought together experts, some of whom intimately know hundreds of species of mushrooms, and local residents who had a deep knowledge of and relationship with the landscape. Over the course of three days we identified over 140 species. We've been doing this event off and on for the past ten years and also holding forays in Toronto and for my students at the University of Guelph.

AM Some of the meaning and value of this activity was in bringing together these two different ways of knowing: the specialized scientific knowledge of the amateur mycologist and the curiosity and knowledge of those who have lived in a place for a lifetime, looking at the same mushrooms each year and knowing the stories of that place.

We need to take our intellectual and creative practices back to the land! I want knowledge to be shared in ways that can help deepen our relationships to the places we live.

Sometimes, if I'm taking a class out on a hike, I hold a seminar in the woods or give an informal lecture connected to where we're visiting. Our abilities to sense, empathize and imagine are very different when we are outside. A few years ago, the artists Elle Flanders and Tamira Sawatzky walked the length of the Bruce Trail, which follows the Niagara Escarpment for almost nine hundred kilometres across southern Ontario, as a curatorial project. They invited us to lead a section of the hike and about thirty people joined us for a ten-kilometre walk along the trail just outside of Toronto. Along the way we had a tour of a reconstructed Iroquoian village at a regional conservation area and had a seminar-in-the-forest where we read several poems by the Nishnaabeg poet and theorist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. Juxtaposed with the sense of pastness imparted by the official tour, Simpson's poems felt very present and urgent. As we swatted flies and cooled off in the shade and listened to the rustle of the leaves, her words enabled us to listen more deeply, with our imaginations and our bodies, and with greater empathy and responsibility. The place itself trains these muscles; it teaches you how to listen and to notice. We learn and think differently when we are outside, and as sound ecologists remind us, we experience space acoustically and are able to hear farther in the outdoors.

DB The mushroom forays that we lead are exercises in noticing. We actually walk very slowly when we are looking for mushrooms in order to look at everything and find new and unexpected forms in the woods. When I lead forays in the university Arboretum for my senior studio art students, I try to draw their attention to the ways this practice might exercise their muscles for seeing—seeing small variations in stipe and cap, seeing beauty in the unexpected or reviled and seeing invisible kingdoms! Hidden worlds, explored with all our senses—among things we usually step on and ignore.

The language and culture of mushrooming is so important, in that each species comes with its own names and stories. These things expand the students' sense of environmental literacy and understanding of how nature is *narrated*. Of course, we come upon other creatures when we are paying such close attention, and this activity enables us to learn about trees and lichens, plants, birds and other animals. A student told me once that she used to think of the woods as "just a bunch of green"—an undifferentiated mass of nothing important—until we walked slowly together this way, looking and learning and greeting the creatures together.

Together in the woods, we see and discuss how our ideas about natural things are informed by practical concerns, as well as by our fears, our desires and our prejudices. It is a life-changing insight to realize that nature is essentially a story we tell about it!

AM With the mushroom foray, there is even something ritualistic in the dedicated time frame, the safety talk, the walking and the species identification. I often tell stories about the artist John Cage, about the role that mushrooms played in his creative practice, and sometimes we read poems together. The foray is as much a cultural event as it is a scientific and pedagogical exercise.

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Studio (Elle Flande
Sawatzky) and perfo
Public Studio's *The*
Bruce Trail, Ontario,

DB And the picnic is crucial! When teaching students, another important thing is that they are learning a *practice*. How do you *practise* the skills and gestures needed for being a conceptual artist? We think about that together.

Foraging, for artists or anyone, is an exercise in following your curiosity. What happens when we allow ourselves to be surprised and disgusted and awakened to all kinds of weirdness, evocative forms, peculiar smells and more. It's also an exercise in humility, where we are overwhelmed by the limitlessness of things to learn and know with confidence.

AM Poisonous fungi are wonderfully humbling! There are some edible mushrooms I won't eat, for fear of mistaking them for a poisonous look-alike. And there are some that remain elusive, ones we've found but have never been able to identify, for example.

DB Yeah, and what can happen when we remember how little we know? This insight is as crucial to learning, to an openness to the world—and it must be in balance with any convictions and facts.

JDLR It can be challenging to integrate experiential forms and environmental learning into formalized structures of education. These approaches are often seen as frivolous or lacking rigour. Learning that even begins to resemble pleasure, the idea of "body as a research instrument" as Amish puts it, feels almost non-existent in most parts of the academy; joy and fun are so absent. The academy denies pleasure. It fears it. But all institutions are made up of individuals, and this pleasure avoidance is telling of some of our own denial of pleasure, how out of tune with ourselves and our bodies we can become when we think we are engaged in *serious* learning. In adrienne maree brown's *Pleasure Activism*, her intention for her readers is to prompt them to "begin to understand the liberation possible when we collectively orient around pleasure and longing." What would our "classrooms" look like if we adopted adrienne's approach to her organizing and work and allowed feeling pleasure to be our guide for letting us know we are on the right track?

DB It is challenging to promote formalized learning activities this way. Amish and I drafted a "Call for Proposals" for the *Outdoor School* artist residency at Banff Centre. It began:

> *Calling radical campers, naked hikers, rock hounds and mushroomers! Calling skinny dippers, water protectors, wildcrafters and flower worshippers! Calling wood fairies, forest bathers and cloud appreciators; amateur botanists, ornithologists and lepidopterists! Calling shelter builders, natural navigators, agoraphiles and ecosexuals!*

We enjoyed imagining a residency for artists of any orientation whose nature practices offered imaginative alternatives to the scientific, commercial and colonial mythologies of nature and the outdoors. We dreamed of a group unified in ethics, imagination and real *love* for creatures, water and weather. Needless to say, it sounded to administrators (who we respect) like way too much fun to be advertised like this—perhaps not serious, or artistic, or academic enough? Or maybe even dangerous somehow? We edited the text

dramatically to proceed through official channels, carefully managing any signifiers of play, desire or pleasure.

JDLR That feels wild to me, because many people would think that if there were a place where we don't have to carefully manage play, desire or pleasure, it would be the lives and practices of artists.

DB Right! Just looking at the pictures of artists on various Banff Centre residencies (including *Outdoor School*, and the simultaneous Beyond Anthropocene residency) swimming in the glacial water of the Bow River together with mathematicians gives me a shiver. And I get some of the same exhilaration that being in freezing water actually generated, among towering mountains at magic hour, in an impossible composition of people.

I had been so uncertain about the feasibility of the idea—to convince the serious math and physics researchers from the Banff International Research Station for Mathematical Innovation and Discovery to swim with half-naked artists in the ice-cold river. I was chatting with math researchers, pestering the research station and generally soliciting anyone who would talk to me (who were few, so it didn't look promising). This group, which sat in a cordoned-off section of the dining hall discussing conference themes including Microlocal Geometry of Langlands Parameter Spaces for p-adic Groups, could not have seemed more alien and unknowable to the artists at the residency.

And then, on the hottest, clearest day in July—

AM They showed up!

DB More than forty artists and mathematicians showed up. Yes, they showed up! They responded to my relentless calls to swim together with us.

We didn't discuss our research or eat cheese and grapes the way we would at any other institutional meet-and-greet. Rather, we took off almost all of our clothes and laughed and screamed, united by the shared experience of having our bodies in icy water. It was a perfect storm of elements—the heat-wave, the cold-water, the glowing-light and the nervous-anxiety—that made the situation so thrilling and unforgettable. It was a dare realized and a shared trial that created instant connectedness at a very elemental, bodily level—and on an emotional one too. If this gentle collision—of worlds and bodies and weather—could work, what else might be possible?

AM The cultures of both environmentalism and academia often require the denial of pleasure as a condition for admission. This is a habit of Western scientific reason and Judeo-Christian morality, where we atone for our sins by giving things up. But this should not be about deprivation, but about reconnecting with our thinking bodies, with pleasure, with other beings, with ethics and responsibility. Intellectual work must support a culture of critical embodiment and ecological reciprocity. When I was the editor at *C Magazine*, my job involved creating public programs to accompany each issue. Like what Diane is describing with her art practice, I wanted to subvert the model of the talk or panel

discussion in ways that facilitated more pleasurable and embodied forms of conviviality and knowledge production, which were embedded in specific places and deepened our relationships to them.

I organized a series of "symposia" that accompanied thematic issues. For a Wet themed issue that I created as an homage to *WET* magazine, an underground "magazine of gourmet bathing" published in California during the late 1970s and early 1980s, we organized a symposium for artists and thinkers that took place in a traditional Finnish sauna, on a property just outside of Toronto owned by the University of Toronto.

The idea behind the symposium was to activate the sauna and the spaces around it, including ponds, a forest and a farm owned by the university. We brought together artists who created events and activities for the sauna, and students who helped to plan the event and cook food for the day. The symposium began with a session led by architectural historian Fred Thompson, where he oriented us to the rituals and practices of the Finnish sauna. Artist and community activist Christie Pearson and writer and scholar Marcus Boon led a session called hot/cold/hot, where participants took turns steaming in the sauna and jumping in the pond and had a discussion about immersive vibratory environments. Jamie Ross, an artist and witch from Montreal, re-enacted a sauna ritual of the Radical Faeries, a queer back-to-the-land community, where he talked about the Toronto bathhouse raids of the 1980s. We all donned glamorous feathered masks and sang songs to celebrate Samhain, the ancient Celtic festival, and Deirdre Fraser, a wild forager, led people on plant walks.

DB Gina Badger, a herbalist and artist, and I also made two kinds of tea—a warm and grounding burdock tea and a cool and elevating mint tea—with plants found on the property, to be served after the sauna. And the artist collective VSVSVS created a comical but functional series of dousing devices made of sponges, buckets and other household objects. A set of very funny sauna accessories!

AM The sauna became a classroom of sensory experience, a somatic laboratory. It was impossible for ideas to be disembodied in such a space, but instead they were felt as moisture and temperature against skin, and with the flushing of blood throughout the body, as people passed from the hot sauna to the cold pond and back again. There was also a sense of queer ecological intimacy: fragrant oak-leaf massages, collective song as the darkness overcame the forest, moist skin in contact with sharp November air as we changed outside. The sauna as a classroom was also about recovering and reinventing ritual and community. I always imagined the sauna as a public sphere in its traditional function across the globe, as a place for people to gather for healing, pleasure, conversation and celebration. But here we had artists, students, witches and scholars sharing knowledge in a place that required a certain degree of physical vulnerability to one another and to the elements.

DB It isn't without complexity—managing nudity and other charged aspects of this kind of participation in swims and saunas, for example—to make things as accessible, safe and considerate as possible. None of these experiments in participation and inclusion are

easy—and they aren't always successful—but I think in some ways, the struggle to solve each situation, even the messy fallout, can be central to the making and the meaning of the works.

AM I think that having spaces where we can negotiate this is very important. There was a lot of discussion about how to structure The Sauna Symposium so that people felt safe and so that it was inclusive. Such expressions of physicality and sociality, and the enjoyment of nature and the outdoors, have been and continue to be denied to many people. A lot of work remains to be done for us to heal our relationships to one another and to nature.

JDLR Embodied knowledge is something that I try to constantly call into my own teaching, as is the idea of incidental learning—fostering in students the idea that true education and lessons happen most often outside of the classroom and can come in the form of unexpected and sometimes unwanted teachers: challenging people and difficult life situations often being the greatest teacher. I am also learning for myself that pain and discomfort can be major motivators for learning and growth. What have been some of your greatest teachers and lessons in life, and did any of them happen in the classroom?

AM The most important lessons in my life have come from the place where I grew up, along the Margaree River on Cape Breton Island. And from my parents, who were artists but whose creative energy was dedicated to making a life there. When I was growing up there, people didn't have any money, and many of them, including my family, were reliant on the land for subsistence. We raised our own vegetables and livestock and cut our own lumber and firewood and made almost everything we needed. I learned how to do these things by following my parents around. We didn't have a television or many other children to play with, so we did what we saw grown-ups doing and helped where we were needed. I don't mean to seem romantic about it; it was filled with hardship. Many other people there lived this way to varying degrees and had a vast knowledge of that place and how to live there. And some of them shared it with incredible generosity. For me, the lessons were in the place itself. How to grow food, how to build and repair things, how to take care of animals, how to be part of a community defined by the fact of being there together, and the relationships and stories that made it meaningful. Getting a carrot from the root cellar in the middle of winter conjured the spring planting, weeding the garden all summer, putting away food in the fall. Describing it now, I remember the dirt on my hands, the water that came from the mountain, the sawdust from the mill that we used to store the carrots, the sense that I was not just in that place, but that I was made from it.

Many years later I read an essay by the writer and activist Wendell Berry, where he described returning to the farm in Kentucky where he'd grown up, to tend to that land, and reflected on the importance of place on one's thinking. I believe deeply in a commitment to the land and its vast complexity—to the human, elemental, interspecies relationships that make up a place. We need to hold these things close, and to take care of them so they will take care of us. And we need the stories that will help us to understand our responsibility.

DB If anything, I hope to impart to students that learning is possible in any context, that making art from the stuff you are "into" or where you are is not only possible, but this way

of working is the most specific, informed and important work you can do. I always ask students about their lives, their parents, their obsessions, their experiences outside of art to help them to see this as possible material, subject, energy, a studio.

I try to model this as much as I talk about it, bringing them on field trips not just to galleries, but to markets and bowling alleys and forests and farms—and exploring what it means to *think* like an artist, and to bring those critical tools, those imaginative tools, everywhere.

JDLR Just teaching students to *think* everywhere feels like such an important gesture. Some would describe my approach to pedagogy as radical, which in botany would mean to spring from the root directly—

DB Wonderful etymology! I think that's a great image. Teaching art is also about nourishing what happens below the surface, about building foundations for making.

JDLR —And I want education that emerges from my life and existence. I want an education to hold me, to move me, to help me to connect more to who I am, so that I can better understand others, empathize and connect meaning to our relationships and to the world. It is about knowing exactly who and where we are. It is the most mundane aspects of radical approaches to education that draw me in and captivate me. It is seeing images of students and teachers at Black Mountain College together at the swimming hole, on walks or tending the land. It is the exercises by dramatist Augusto Boal that simply have us understand the power and beauty of just tuning in and listening to each other—that educator Paulo Freire reminds us there is knowledge in every step. It is the way activist and academic Grace Lee Boggs was teaching through community gardening how we support and nourish each other and have agency and control over our food, our land and our lives. I see these legacies and approaches alive in *Outdoor School* and some of your other projects. Can you talk about your pedagogical influences?

DB For me, I look to artists as pedagogical influences, especially performers and site-responsive practitioners whose research extends far outside of art galleries. And from my own teachers, past and present, my students and my colleagues like FASTWÜRMS and Karen Houle, who inspire so much. The ethics and commitment of farmers, orchardists, beekeepers, flower arrangers, naturalists and foragers (and dancers too, actually!) are a limitless source of inspiration as I learn about their objects and methods. And I am eager to learn, and practise being a student myself, all the time. This informs my teaching too—my experience being a total beginner over and over. And just like ideas, materials and space for art making, pedagogical influences are also everywhere.

AM I see pedagogy as a practice of world-making. While I feel an affinity with many artists, my influences come from outside of the art world and outside of traditional academia. Growing up in Margaree Valley, the legacy of the educator Moses Coady was a significant presence in our community. Coady was a founder of the co-operative movement in Canada, and his work mirrored that of Paulo Freire, using adult education and community organizing to help build economic self-reliance in rural Nova Scotia. When I started out in grad school, I looked at social movements and community organizing, and much later, after I