Compassionate Being as a Treatment Tool for Ecological Distress:

What Art Can Do

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Abstract

This paper explores compassionate being and self-reflection as treatment tools for ecological distress through the lens of contemporary art. Grounded in the understanding of humans as Ecological, Social, and Personal beings, the paper emphasizes the unique positionality of artists in facilitating real responsibility and action in the face of the climate crisis. The paper is structured into five sections, introducing my research motivations and the interconnectedness of art and science. It also introduces the foundational concepts of my artistic practice, highlighting the significance of process, materials, and emotional connections in driving impactful change. Subsequent sections explore the themes of Ecological Being, Social Being, and Personal Being, drawing on key theories, concepts, and influences from scholars and artists. Through case studies and personal artwork references, the paper demonstrates how art can be a tool to foster ecological consciousness, challenge social constructs, and encourage compassionate action. The concluding reflections emphasize the importance of optimism, realism, and shared responsibility in addressing ecological distress. The paper asserts that art serves as a crucial beginning, opening doors to action and increasing recognition of our interconnectedness with the natural world.

Contents

Acknowledgements……ii

Abstract……..…….iii

Introduction……1

Section 1 Motivations and Main Concepts……..5

The Baseline: Where Things Stand……..5

Eco Criticizing the Past and Art for Crisis……...10

Art and Science: The Artist's Approach to Research……..15

Application and Approaches in Practice……19

Section 2 Foundations……...20

Introduction to my Practice……...20

Key Concepts and Influences……23

Process and Materials……26

Results and Connections……29

Section 3 Ecological Being ……..……....34

Explaining Ecological Consciousness……..34

Complex Ecologies and Multispecies Coexistence……40

Art and Ecological Being in Symbiosis……43

Ecological Being in Practice……47

Section 4 Social Being……51

Political Ecologies……..52

Decolonizing Nature and Empowered Responsibility……54

Creative Solutions in Crisis……57

Social Being in Practice……..60

Section 5 Personal Being……65

The Strength of Emotion……66

Compassionate Ecology……70

Empathetic Actions, Empowered Voices……..73

Personal Being in Practice……..76

Conclusion……..82

Bibliography……..84

Introduction

"Against the tyranny of denial and the oppression of indifference we must prevail to find a new vision of the relationship between human nature and the rest of nature. We see you, children of the long-arcing future…Do we leave you storms of ruin and a sinking Atlantis, or will you judge us the heroes of a miracle?"[1]

In our modern age, many challenges face us and require our immediate attention. Political, economic, social, and environmental changes are taking place at a rapid rate, and at the forefront of our minds is the question of how we might address these shifts and take action where needed. Among these, climate change is an example of just one matter requiring immediate attention-based adaptation and mitigation efforts across a multiplicity of fields.

A close look at the vital signs of our planet alone raises alarm at the cataclysmic possibilities for our future if something doesn't change soon. According to NASA, the global temperature has risen nearly 2º F since the pre-industrial era. Correspondingly, the sea level has risen 4 inches since January 1993.[2] Glacial ice sheets are shrinking and the ocean is warming. The ozone layer is depleting, causing unprecedented weather changes and disasters. We are seeing an unparalleled mass extinction take place, with an average of 3 species going extinct each hour.[3] Many of these extinctions are caused by the dire effects of deforestation and climate change, which are in turn directly influenced by human consumption. With the coming

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[1] James Balog, *The Human Element: A Time Capsule from the Anthropocene* (New York, USA, NY: Rizzoli New York, 2022). Intro.

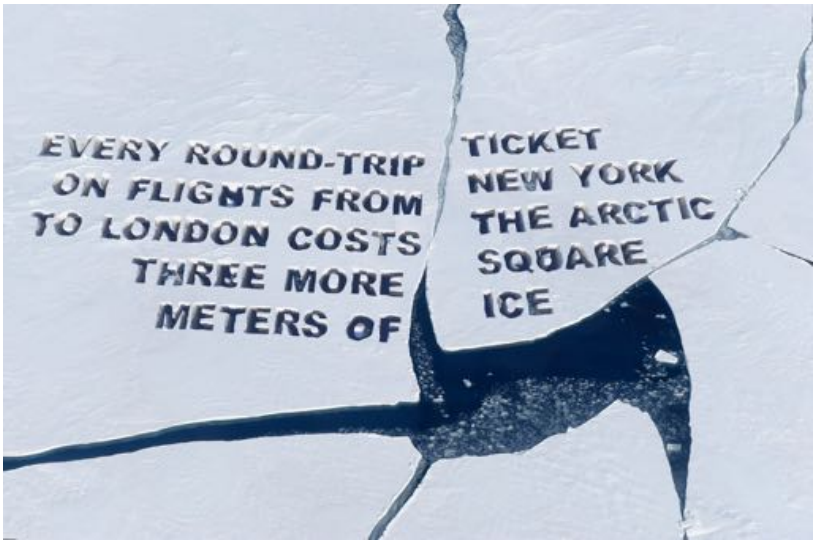
[2] "Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet," NASA, March 2024, https://climate.nasa.gov/.

[3] Stephanie Feldstein, "Human Population Growth and Extinction," Center for Biological Diversity, accessed September 2023, https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/population_and_sustainability/extinction/.

times of our planet and all species who inhabit it in danger, now more than ever it is crucial to take responsibility and fight for these futures in every way possible. This is a substantial necessity for the direction of my current artistic projects. The task of ensuring the future for our planet can no longer be entrusted solely to the whims of governments and corporate leaders. Scientists and politicians are not the sole members who can steer the climate crisis discussion any longer. The humanities have a vitally important role to play in the conversation, and can offer the needed provisions of alternative visions and diverse perspectives.

Historically, environmental activism and caretaking has been seen as the responsibility of disciplines like biology, ecology, and environmental studies. However, humans are responsible to participate and responsible to care by nature of our existence. In one way or another, all living generations have inherited the choices made for our planet in the past, and we are charged to deal with them. Individuals are the driving force in this effort, and the responsibility falls largely to us because we're the only ones willing to accept it. Individuals have agency, and agency is one of the last and most crucial forms of resistance we have against this crisis on our planet. Artist Oliver Ressler, who makes politically-engaged environmental artwork, speaks to the power of individual engagement when he says, "The theme of global warming is of such importance that there's a need to address people on a very personal level because it really affects everyone. All of us, and certainly our children and future generations, will be hugely affected by these decisions we make now or which we don't make now."[4]

[4] Barnaby Drabble, *Along Ecological Lines: Contemporary Art and Climate Crisis* (Manchester, UK: Gaia Project, 2019). 115.

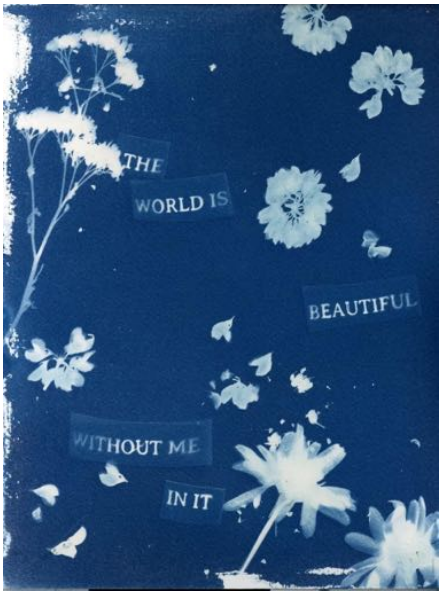


(Fig. 1) Oliver Ressler, *Every round-trip ticket on flights from New York to London costs the Arctic three more square meters of ice*, Digital print on dibond, 2019 (Visualization: estudio elgozo)

I speak from my background, experience, and efforts as an artist as I make work that pushes for change. I recognize and understand how easy it is to feel powerless in the face of the social, economic and cultural issues that press in on us with increasing urgency. A fundamental tenet of my art practice and subsequent research practice is emphasizing the power of an individual to facilitate change. I do this by exploring the connections held within us, and accessing those to cultivate feelings of hope and motivation toward engagement with complicated issues. As individuals, when we properly understand the potential we have as agents for change, it can be subverted or emphasized in a way that increases positive, sustainable, equitable results focused toward empowered futures. It is crucial to understand our individual role in this crisis, and the individual must be accessed on a personal level for this understanding to take root and grow.

Acting as a way to encourage individual participation, environmentally engaged art is often guided by a desire to raise awareness. Still, the artists facilitating this type work agree that

"with awareness alone, it will not be possible to achieve much-needed change [especially in] our political and economic system."[5] As individuals engage, learn, and participate, we all have a voice and a solution to contribute to fixing the problems we face.



(Fig. 2) Camryn Maher, *The World Is Beautiful Without Me In It*, cyanotype, 2023

My art practice engages with this as I am motivated by our responsibility to our planet and our current status of existence. I look to the role of the individual as an agent for change as my work influences those choices the individual can make. I encourage learning, understanding, and connection that leads to creative problem-solving and positive individual action. I value interdisciplinary collaboration, and utilize my art practice as an exploration of the ways in which interdisciplinary collaboration between artists and others on issues of climate change provides a way for people from all disciplines to reconsider their current practices for realignment with long term sustainability goals. Curator James Brady said, in investigation of positive human impact on the natural world, "we are in need of many different perspectives on climate change

[5] Drabble, *Along Ecological Lines*, 113.

in order to successfully mitigate its effects and adapt to the challenges it presents, and the arts play an important role in providing these."[6]

Fundamental to the thesis of this paper and the goals of my art practice is the categorization of the individual agent as one with the potential for different, activated methods of "Being". In other words, the very nature of the ways in which we exist produce targeted and effective acts of individual agency slated toward positive change. This paper will explore how we position ourselves in relation to nature and wider ecology, how we act ecologically despite being members of human societies, and what personal power we access through our existence as thinking and feeling beings. I will show how I represent this in my artwork as I understand and connect with the world around me ecologically, socially, and personally.

I am an Ecological Being (part of a greater nature or prone to certain natures), a Social Being (part of a society, I have agency to think, take action, and make decisions), and a Personal Being (I have emotions, dreams, goals, hopes, desires, and most of all, potential). My practice and research assesses how these three ways of Being interact, and what steps bring them closer together. These three states are not detrimental to each other. Rather, all three are assets that can be used together to make solutions for issues we care about, and contain our passion for a reliable, sustainable, and positive future.

SECTION 1: Motivations and Main Concepts

The Baseline: Where Things Stand

6 Drabble, *Along Ecological Lines*, Intro.

"Facts of nature forever supersede the fabrications of human ideology. Nature is indifferent to our pleas, ignorance, lobbying, negotiation, or pretense. Denial of natural facts is nothing but peculiar delusion and willful ignorance."[7]

Many factors explain why our efforts against climate change haven't worked in the past, or why change hasn't taken place as rapidly as it should, in the way that it should. With these many contributors, it often feels as though a frantic hunt is taking place to find whom we should place blame on, or who can be at fault for allowing us to arrive at the problems we're facing today. This method has not led to our attaining meaningful, large-scale accountability in the past, and it certainly won't today. With our current reality and an uncertain future facing us, our only choice is to accept the past, and move forward in more positive and constructive ways.

A goal of my art is to share my perspective and contribute possible avenues toward a better future. With this I aim to engage and motivate others to contribute their own diverse solutions and perspectives. An interdisciplinary approach, with many positive solutions to a complex problem, coming from the strengths and perspectives of individuals, is a promising answer to the crisis we find ourselves in.

> "In the [decades] since the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was adopted, progress in the area of international climate policy has been modest at best. Annual greenhouse gas emissions have increased by over one-third since 1992. Acute conflicts of interest among industrialized, emerging, and developing countries remain a persistent obstacle. One of the few points of general consensus in the international community is on the overarching objective of limiting the global

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[7] Balog, *The Human Element,* 92.

temperature increase to two degrees Celsius in order to avoid crossing the threshold into 'dangerous climate change.'"[8]

A large factor contributing to a lack of climate action is the simple fact of differing perspectives between individuals. For this reason, the 'two degrees Celsius' figure was established as a way to unite disciplines in spite of these differences. "It functions…as the one concrete objective on which key actors from policy, media, and research have been able to reach at least interim agreement. The decision to establish a fixed limit using a temperature category with no fractional numbers represents the desire to reduce complexity and the desire to claim objectivity."[9] Though such a figure exists, many of our ruling bodies of governance have failed to make meaningful progress toward the decreasing of this figure. Still, this figure represents an alternative effort toward a solution to a complex issue through lowering boundaries and crossing disciplinary lines.

Geo-political researcher Erik Swyngedouw states "A just socio-environmental perspective always needs to consider the question of who gains and who pays and to ask serious questions about multiple power relations. [...] In other words, environmental transformations are not independent of class, gender, ethnicity, or other power struggles."[10] Perspectives like this call for us to investigate why meaningful progress hasn't been made, and understand what motivating factors are really preventing these changes from taking place. TJ Demos, scholar, historian, and cultural critic, attacks these issues in his call-outs of

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8 Oliver Geden and Felix Schenuit. "Climate Neutrality as Long-Term Strategy." Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), August 2019. https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2019C33/.

9 Ibid.

10 Erik Swyngedouw, "Circulations and Metabolisms: (Hybrid) Natures and (Cyborg) Cities," *Science as Culture* 15, no. 2 (June 2006): 37–38, https://doi.org/10.1080/09505430600707970, 37.

"enviro-discipline" - or the authority our geo-political bodies take to govern the health of biologies and their natural environments. He says,

> "One can understand this enviro-discipline as the practice of national, non-governmental, and international agencies to regulate the 'health of our natural environment' so that sustainable development is defined in ways favorable to financial interests, in opposition to comprehending ecology as a field of interlinking systems of biology and technology, social practices and political structures, that might otherwise support natural stability and biodiversity first and foremost. In this sense, enviro-discipline has proved to be concerned more with managing the public's perception of environmental health than with regulating industrial damage to natural systems, or protecting against climate disruption."[11]

It's thus possible to conclude that some consequences we are seeing from climate change are due to a lack of action and responsibility taken by governments, corporations and policymakers. This demands individuals to act and take responsibility when our governing bodies won't. In some ways it may seem futile. How do normal people combat this? How do artists make art to influence, encourage change, and offer solutions? It is important to consider the individual's perception of where they sit in relation to the crisis. We are subjected to the realities of climate change everywhere we turn. "Nobody is actually arguing that large numbers of people need to travel to see climate change effects in situ, not least because its disastrous effects are now tangible across the world."[12]

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[11] T. J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin, DE: Sternberg Press, 2016), 53.

[12] Drabble, *Along Ecological Lines,* 54.

With a chaotic present and an uncertain future facing us, our human psychology is not immune from the effects of disaster. We are experiencing climate anxiety and resulting climate indifference[13] in mass quantities. In the face of this existential threat, we are indifferent with a perceived inability to do something about this problem. Climate indifference is "a collective passivity that is as much of an obstacle to confronting the intractable challenges posed by global warming as more aggressive forms of climate denial."[14] The Handbook of Climate Psychology "suggests that 'paying heed to what is happening…is a healthier response than turning away in denial or disavowal'."[15]

Multifaceted problems require multifaceted solutions. In face of personally and financially motivated governing organizations and widespread individual feelings of paralysis and defeat, a solution-oriented path forward should be educational, attainable, and empowering. My artwork and research intersect here, creating work that seeds feelings of hope and positivity in the face of our chaotic reality. Work that shows creative, positive, individual action. How activated methods of Being put our existence in direct opposition against the issues we face. My research questions how art can "operate at the rocky juncture of activism and nongovernmental politics…[how it] opposes the commercialization of nature, or counteracts greenwashing to [redefine] the environment with a focus on global justice and ecological sustainability."[16]

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13 "The Handbook of Climate Psychology defines climate anxiety as a 'heightened emotional, mental or somatic distress in response to dangerous changes in the climate system'." Joseph Dodds, "The Psychology of Climate Anxiety," BJPsych bulletin, August 2021, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8499625/.

14 Drabble, *Along Ecological Lines,* 57.

15 Dodds, "The Psychology of Climate Anxiety."

16 Demos, *Decolonizing Nature,* 53-54.

Eco Criticizing the Past and Art for Crisis

Artists have always played a role in crises, historically and today. Their efforts have been part and parcel of the working of issues on a larger, interdisciplinary scale. Artists are able to communicate a different emotional complexity than facts and data alone often can. Artists can express collective grief, collective healing, or collective hope. They document history and imagine the future. Art makes social justice visible and rallies communities in times of crisis. Artists have a place in the climate discussion and historical presence is the witness. Artists have a unique positionality that they can use in the way they interact ecologically, socially, and personally to take real responsibility and real action.

It's helpful to contextualize the artist's role in the climate crisis through historical reference. I approach this through an Ecocritical point of view in my research. This approach for study and critique focuses on environmental interconnectedness, sustainability, and justice in cultural interpretation. Ecocriticism engages historically overlooked ecological sensitivities, providing a means by which to analyze the past in order to right wrongdoings and make better decisions for the future.

In my work, this type of analysis allows for reflections and critiques of human interactions with nature and ecological crises, and the ultimate promotion of increased environmental sensitivity. In my 2024 work *love you to death*, I reimagine what a symbiotic relationship can look like between a human being and a body of water in ecological danger. I call for mindfulness in our actions with nature through compassion and a heightened awareness of who and what we share our world with.

(Fig. 3) Camryn Maher, *love you to death*, durational performance, 2023-2024

"[Artists today] are, on the one hand, aiming to transform our world and making claims that we can see things, understand them and even change them. On the other hand, we are very much embedded in the whole frame of established relations within the contemporary art system, which is actually part of the broader industry of entertainment, accumulation of cultural capital and monetization of creativity..."[17] Using research methods and an Ecocritical critique of art, we can overcome the established framework of our present-day position in the art world and in society as a whole. Raising our awareness of the past, we can ascertain historical truth as we shed light on past environmental injustices and overlooked ecological sensitivities. It provides us scaffolding for the future as we examine ways in which human creativity might unfold within the larger environmental context, and how that can be applied for

[17] Drabble, *Along Ecological Lines,* 69.

our good. In understanding the Ecocritical discipline, it is important to understand its history, tenets and limitations.

The genre of Ecocriticism in art is relatively new, but proves that many ideas circulating around recognition of nature and environmental improvement are present in a history that goes back centuries. Jonathan Bate, an author and founding theorist of the methodology wrote *Romantic Ecology*, a 1991 publication reframing the politics and work of poet William Wordsworth as being inherently "green" and environment-forward. John Elder, author, contributed to the early phases of the Ecocriticism movement in America with his 1985 publication *Imagining the Earth*. In this work, Elder illustrates how poetry shapes our perspectives on nature and highlights the personal connections between academic pursuits and ecological engagement. Robert Pogue Harrison, author and scholar, departed from a biophilic[18] approach toward Ecocriticism with his contributions to *Uncommon Ground*, a 1996 anthology edited by environmental historian, cultural critic and geographer William Cronon. Harrison's work punctuates arguments about the idea of 'wilderness,' and modifications in nature that took place long before colonization. Literary critic N. Katherine Hayles removes physical nature from the Ecocritical entirely in her research that examines the technological as being environmental in itself and construing interconnections that bind humans, nature, and machines together.

It is by no means a requisite of Ecocriticism in art and literature to speak only about specific aesthetic fields, such as botany or landscape. The 'larger environment' that is often

18 Showing or being the human tendency to interact or be closely associated with other forms of life in nature.

discussed by the discipline includes technological, urban, created, and imagined environments in addition to the earth and nature environments we tend to think of when we encounter the prefix “eco-” in use with any other terminology. I access this in my art practice and the tenets of my thesis by speaking about nature within the larger environmental context, especially as I am pushing for consideration of non-human entities in human social movements, as with my work *love you to death.*

As we use an Ecocritical mindset to create an informed, future forward outlook, we are tasked with continually reassessing our approach in the face of constantly shifting circumstances. An Ecocritical mindset calls for accountability in individual and collective agency. “How can we act in an uncertain world where our familiar compass bearings don't work as well as we once thought they did, and how must we change the way we think in order to reorient ourselves and act responsibly?”[19] We must reiterate that what has worked for us in the past will not continue to work for us in the present.

(Fig. 4) David Haley, *A Walk On The Wild Side*, 2005, Manchester

19 William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1995), 28.

Artist David Haley is an artist whose work accesses tenets of the Ecocriticism model for examining the past and planning the future. Haley works directly with ecosystems and their inhabitants to generate dialogue about the relationships we form with our environment and how those can empower us to find "capable futures." A term coined by Haley, he explains, "I do not use the expression sustainable development anymore, but always refer to 'capable futures' as being a specific way of engaging and creating greater capacity to engage with the future that we need to understand."[20] I implement this concept in my thesis as I promote the idea that the power for positive action lies with individuals.

Activated methods of Ecological, Social, and Personal Being allow our existence to become a step forward toward a capable future. With regard to art, this type of engagement empowers us not only to question "What is the artwork?" but to instead ask, "How does the art work?" Haley says, "No pretense is made to offer solutions, nor to further problematize the situation, but to creatively enable [subjects] to identify and form meaningful questions for 'capable futures' and thereby potentially increase their capacity for ecological resilience and adaptation to change."[21] By questioning, investigating, and learning from the past in order to understand what decisions and events informed our current crises, we can form our own adaptations to 'capable futures' and identify meaningful and action-oriented steps forward.

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[20] Drabble, *Along Ecological Lines,* 182.

[21] Ibid. 177.

Art and Science: The Artist's Approach to Research

"The transformative challenges presented by [climate change psychology] run deep and wide, calling for an interdisciplinary approach. Heritage provides a lens to see the shape of things over time. Ecology provides the pattern that connects those things over time. Art may provide the process to transform those things to culture over time. Turning the face of disaster to the face of opportunity."[22]

As we reframe the past and call for solutions forward, we must investigate what artist-led research offers to this effort. At the root of artist-led research is an interdisciplinary collaboration between art and science. This pairing not only proves why multidisciplinary efforts are essential to mitigate climate change, but it also justifies the role of art in partnership with science, and details the capability of the art and science to facilitate active agency and active change.

Though often applied differently, art and science are incredibly complementary to one another. Artist, explorer, and conservationist James Balog says, "Art feels the pulse of the world. Science analyzes that pulse. Each informs the other, clarifying our world with a light more luminous than either can shine on its own."[23] A partnership between art and science opens the door to putting facts behind our emotions, propelling actions, and reaching across borders to make a greater impact. From 2021-2023 my research led me to collaborate with the Great Basin Bug Lab, a group at the University of Nevada, Reno researching and promoting conservation for endangered species of butterflies in Northern Nevada. During these years, I was a visiting artist,

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22 Drabble, *Along Ecological Lines,* 176.

23 Balog, *The Human Element*, 26.

and was asked to illustrate different species of butterflies. Many of these species lack documentation and representation in conservation efforts, and can be aided by simply having visual depictions of their appearances made more widely accessible. As the lab's visiting artist, I took time to learn about and understand the species in order to illustrate them.

(Fig. 5) Camryn Maher, *Euchloe ausonides*, digital illustration, 2022

As an artist, I used my specific point of view to highlight the inherent beauty and uniqueness of these species. I made an effort to represent them as individuals, displayed in accompaniment with the plants found in the species' natural environments. This partnership allowed me to take facts and research and present them in a new light. It also allowed for an opportunity to address data in a new way. Shown in publication and presentations, these images extend a distinct point of access to little known species in excellent need of human care and consideration. When the motivations of artists are aligned with the motivations of scientists and others, our combined skill sets and efforts have increased impact.

In artist-led research, there is evidence to promote that a partnership of art and science possesses combined effects of persuasion that one does not hold without the other. 2015 publication *Strategies for Public Engagement on Environmental Matters: You can lead a horse to water but can you make it drink?* examines the partnership's acuity in addressing environmental issues currently pressing on us. The article examines the different personality types[24] between scientists and their target audiences, and shows how those differences can create detrimental barriers in communication.

> "[The] apparent mismatch in preference [preference of sensing bias] may explain the difficulties often experienced by scientists in attempting to convey a sense of urgency and importance regarding concepts such as climate change, where it may be perceived as being more abstract, or having no immediate effect or local concern to the individual…Thus, steps taken to address the communication barrier have resulted in the unusual but effective collaborations between the arts and science..."[25]

Art is an active tool that facilitates crossing these communication barriers between issues and how people visualize them. Artists Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson make up the collaborative artist team Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson. For decades, these two artists have worked together to promote contemporary art as an active and change-making voice in the ongoing climate crisis. The artists "consider art to be both the most promising platform and the most likely instrument by which the fusion and mutual complication or disturbance of

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24 Referenced as sensing biases in the article.

25 Josephine Mmojieje, "Strategies for Public Engagement on Environmental Matters: You Can Lead a Horse to Water, but Can You Make It Drink?," *Applied Environmental Education & Communication* 14, no. 4 (October 2, 2015): 232–45, https://doi.org/10.1080/1533015x.2015.1109485, 234-235.

traditionally discrete knowledge fields will succeed in effecting significant and increasingly urgent cultural and behavioral change."[26]

(Fig. 6) Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, image from the research site of *Trout Fishing in America and Other Stories*, 2015

Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson have a multidisciplinary, learning-centered and research-driven approach to art and exhibition practice. In 2016, the team published their book "You Must Carry Me Now: The Cultural Lives of Endangered Species". Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson detail their participatory efforts in a two-year conservation initiative to reintroduce endangered species of the Chub and Condor to the Colorado River and Grand Canyon respectively. The efforts of the team were in partnership with researchers at Arizona State University, where the results of this research were shown in a 2015 exhibition *Trout Fishing in America and Other Stories*.[27]

In this exhibition, the team examined "how we perceive and communicate ideas of sustainability and how effectively we can engender collective responsibility regarding the

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[26] Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson, Snæbjörnsdóttir / Wilson, 2018, https://snaebjornsdottirwilson.com/.

[27] Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson, Snæbjörnsdóttir / Wilson, 2018, https://snaebjornsdottirwilson.com/category/projects/trout-fishing-in-america/.

environment."[28] In their publication about the exhibition they say, "There is an urgent need to return to the complex, multi-faceted, intuited certainties and uncertainties that artist-led research delivers. We need these investigations - driven by thoughtful, disciplined thinkers - to concentrate on issues immediately around us that also implicate wide circles of interdependence and responsibility."[29] Exhibitions like this inspire me as I utilize partnerships between art and science in a like manner. I examine environmental issues and human impact in my art practice to create research-driven artwork that addresses threatening problems through approachable access points. I show in a wider scope how we as Ecological, Social, and Personal individuals are active, empowered agents for change with the ability to face a problem head-on and fix our names to the solutions.

Application and Approaches in Practice

In understanding the current precarities of our planet in crisis, I have a realistic point of view of where past actions have led us, I understand the need for multi-faceted solutions, and I institute cross-disciplinary collaborations to engineer them. I use an Ecocritical framework to examine artwork and actions of the past through a more ecologically conscious point-of-view, and I use my art practice to ask questions and identify areas of interest to form better paths forward. I add personal layers of understanding to the subjects I am making art about by learning about them and interacting with them, and use those as points of connection to link me, as the artist, to the subject through emotional understanding.

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[28] Ibid.

[29] Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson, *You Must Carry Me Now: The Cultural Lives of Endangered Species*, ed. Ron Broglio (284 Publishing, 2016), 14.

My research centers on the unique potential art and science have as a paired, interdisciplinary motivator. I use this pairing to promote reflection, collaboration, and results that further positive sustainability goals to improve the climate outlook. Seeing examples of those who are already taking necessary steps in this direction motivates me to join, contribute, and create innovative and liberating solutions to our ongoing environmental crisis. Transdisciplinary collective action to challenge traditionally held artistic, environmental, scientific, and social norms opens a pathway toward adaptive resilience that ushers in a positive future.

SECTION 2: Foundations

Introduction to My Practice

I view visual art as its own form of communication. I am most interested in artwork that fills a need, creates a connection, and proposes a solution. I resonate with research-focused, multi-disciplinary art practices grounded in problem-solving and connection across communities and individuals. My goal is to foster connection, engagement, and resonance with the viewer of my work through the vehicle of emotion. This is paramount to making ecological, social, and personal activations occur.

My artistic explorations have their roots in nature-themed, connection-based artwork. I studied as a painter in the Snake River region of the American Northwest. I spent much of my time interacting with the landscape, studying light in changing weather conditions, observing seasonal flora patterns, and depicting the essence of what I saw and felt in these landscapes.

This sensitivity to natural designs would lead me to investigate further what kinds of species existed in the landscapes surrounding me, and what their requirements for existence are. I was motivated to create work that would recognize their individuality and call attention to their importance and needs. My series *Endemic Ghosts of the Snake River Region* demonstrates this as I created individual portraits of four endemic and endangered plant species. Often overlooked by humans, I highlighted these species' individual beauty and uniqueness as I painted their likeness in a portrait-style approach mirroring those that humans use to designate figures of historical, political, or social importance.

(Fig. 7) Camryn Maher, *Penstemon concinnus* from series *Endemic Ghosts of the Snake River Region*, oil and mixed media on canvas, 2021

Connecting to the natural world is inherent and should be accessed and respected in order to bring about positive changes in the face of environmental degradation. Artwork is a powerful modality to communicate these issues, and creates space for connective feeling, learning, and progressive conclusions. I continue to be inspired by my interactions and connections with the landscapes that surround me. Past and current inspirations for my work

also come from my native desert, the Great Basin, where I am a fourth-generation resident, and have spent the majority of my life living and working.

In my art practice, an interdisciplinary approach allows me to utilize a mode of contributing that is relevant, relatable, and attainable. It provides the structure for combining modes of Ecological, Social, and Personal Being, and it encourages relevant and necessary solutions to our bigger issues. Ecologically I incorporate and theorize my place in nature. By placing myself as part of a greater whole, I use my voice to speak from within nature, ecology, and biology. I show care and concern for non-human communities. Socially I access current issues and justify my work in the face of them. I contribute as part of a community body, and show regard for my human communities. Personally my perspective and point of view as an individual are unique and valuable. I use deep emotions to showcase my personal connections with the subjects of my work. I partner this with both my placement in nature and society to demonstrate points, encourage action, and make changes.

Ecological, Social, and Personal Being are activated through interdisciplinary approaches in every area of my artistic practice. This includes the approaches in my artistic research, like my collaboration with the Great Basin Bug Lab. Or, the foundational theories and concepts driving my practice, like the Ecocritical research methodology. The way I implement materials, by involving a sense of place in my material choices and utilizing this as a process to create my artwork. The way I share my work to make connections, using a learning-centered exhibition approach and leaving on strategies like those of David Haley or Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson. Each of these approaches are meant to drive an activation of the individual, whether that be on an ecological, social, or personal level.

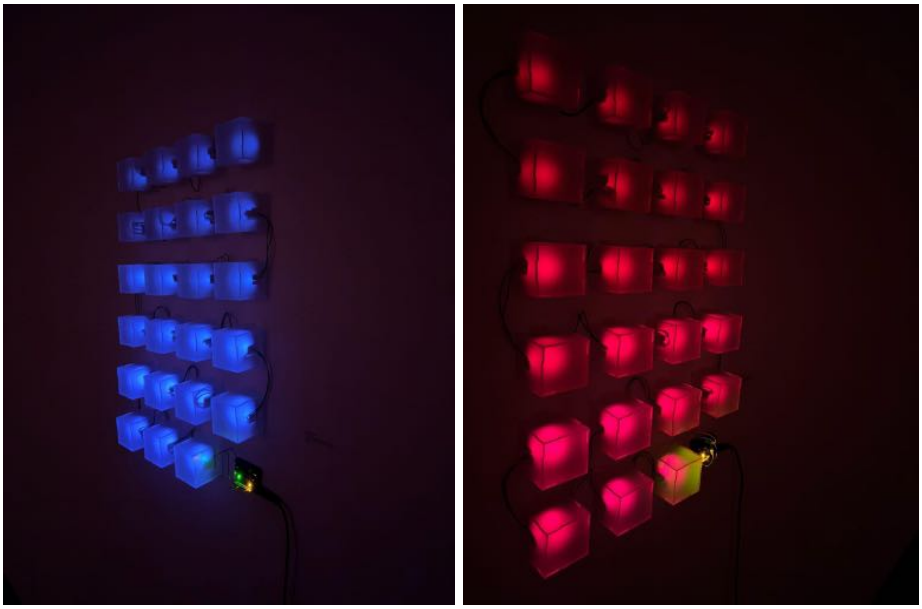
Key Concepts and Influences

The key theories, concepts, and influences driving my practice define where I position myself in my practice, and what I structure it on. Assigning these values in my work designates where I come from, and establishes the groundwork for proposals to move forward. Humans have not learned how to responsibly coexist with nature. My artwork positions myself as part of nature, with the responsibility to make choices and decisions that promote a better multispecies future. I understand my species is not the only species faced with an uncertain future due to climate degradations. My goal is to decenter my human point of view and allow other points of view to take equal precedence, like those coming from the many non-human others we share our planet with.

I am inspired by the work of Donna Haraway. Her book “Staying With the Trouble” addresses the fact of uncertain futures for all species on this planet. Haraway coined the term “Making Kin.” Making Kin is the forging of alliances across multiple species, new technologies, and diverse communities. Making Kin highlights collaboration, compromise, and inclusion to address social inequality, ecological distress, and biodiversity loss between all species. I am inspired by the theories of William Cronon, who is a foundational contributor to the Ecocriticism methodology. Cronon argues throughout his body of work that the solution to the climate crisis does not lie with the removal of humans from nature.

I am influenced by artists working in fields concerning learning-focused exhibition, activism, and community involvement. These are tools that allow my artwork to contribute to larger conversations and propose creative solutions to complex problems, as with my

partnership with the Great Basin Bug Lab. I again look at the work of Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson. In more projects than the aforementioned *You Must Carry Me Now: The Cultural Lives of Endangered Species*, "the production of their work is unashamedly driven and facilitated by intensive research and interdisciplinary associations; as artists, they consider art to be both the most promising platform and the most likely instrument by which the fusion and mutual complication or disturbance of traditionally discrete knowledge-fields will succeed in effecting significant and increasingly-urgent cultural and behavioral change." [30]



(Fig. 8) Camryn Maher, *On Being 23*, 23 acrylic lightboxes, 23-piece Neopixel circuit, microcontroller, 12 hours of emotional data, 2023

Scientific research and artistic research serve different purposes while maintaining a united common goal of seeking information, producing facts and realities, and communicating about them. They can also serve different purposes in the way they utilize and present data. As an artist I take many liberties in the way I use and approach data in my work. I collect traditional scientific data for use in my work as I study specimens, behavioral information, and habitats for

[30] Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson, "Snæbjörnsdóttir / Wilson."

my illustrations of endangered butterflies. I use this data to make the visual information I present scientifically accurate. I also use experiences, feelings, and observations as forms of personal "data." I pay attentions to my perceptions and connections in my experiences to collect a form of "data" about myself for use in my work.

In my piece *On Being 23*, I learned how to use bio-sensing devices to register feedback about my dermal responses to stimuli around me. This inspired me to create "data" by recording my emotional state every hour on the hour in what I deemed a standard 12-hour period in my 23-year-old life. I translated these data points into synesthetic color values that were then written into code controlling a series of lightboxes. These lightboxes visually displayed a condensed representation of my feelings during a regular day in this period of my life. *On Being 23* shows my own emotions and perspectives being turned into data that allows for more personal communication.

Research as artwork builds relationships with people working in a wide variety of disciplines and allows me to access a larger community within my work. In this field I am inspired by the work of James Balog. Balog, an artist, explorer, and conservationist, documents the melting of the glaciers in his *Extreme Ice Survey (EIS)*.[31] *EIS* comprised more than 43 time-lapse cameras at 24 sites on multiple continents. First undertaken as a creative assignment, *EIS* changed Balog from a nature photographer into an artist working at the forefront of climate change to visualize the influence we have on Earth's elements and the influence Earth's elements have on us. In exploration of his theories, Balog has scaled the world's oldest trees, cleaned up natural disasters on the front lines, and quelled raging wildfires

[31] James Balog, "A Program of Earth Vision Institute," Extreme Ice Survey, 2022, http://extremeicesurvey.org/.

as part of the United States Fire Service, all in the name of artist-led research. Balog's work is process oriented, community driven, and emotionally grounded.

(Fig. 9) Camryn Maher, *Eriogonum Holmgrenii* from series *Endemic Ghosts of the Snake River Region*, oil and mixed media on canvas, 2021

The first work I created motivated by artist-led research and cross-disciplinary conversations was the aforementioned *Endemic Ghosts of the Snake River Region*. I examined the dire situation of the critically endangered plant species Penstemon concinnus, Eriogonum holmgrenii, Eremogone congesta, and Ericameria watsonii in the Snake River Range of the Great Basin. These species are often overlooked in favor of mining and agricultural development and susceptible to plant blindness.[32] By portraying the species as individuals and framing them in a way that bestows importance, provides a voice, and creates a point for public access through the modality of art, I made a foray into research-led artwork that partners a problem with the context of emotional connection.

[32] A type of cognitive bias wherein plant species are ignored as a result of common human tendency.

Process and Materials

I employ a wide variety of media in my practice, subscribing to interdisciplinary tactics to combine any mediums that effectively communicate the intentions of my work. I utilize paint, collage, installation, photography, and light materials in my practice. My methods and processes are formed within the context of color, to communicate concepts and embody emotions. As a synesthete,[33] I have personal ties to color and feel that color is the most accurate and impactful means by which I can express myself.

I focus on processes such as time-based collecting, conscious and subconscious ritual, embodiment of experiences, and the inclusion of my own personal research and data. These processes highlight the ways in which I connect to and understand others, the world around me, and myself. I elevate the importance of process to be equal with the results of my work. The process of making work provides opportunities for a deeper incarnation of concept that produces a more resonant result. With my art, I strive to open up a space within the viewer where deep feeling can take root and become activated agency.

I am interested in the use of public exhibition as a way to create a play for dialogue, discourse, and problem-solving to take place. In these spaces learning can flow. I implement these directions in my work through installation. With installation I create an activated space where the viewer can have a visceral experience with artwork. Installation facilitates the Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson model of showcasing work where "Individual agency is activated through engagement created by 1. A complex, multilayered encounter with fauna, and 2. A

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[33] Synesthetes refer to those who experience the neurological condition of synesthesia, wherein a sensory perception outputs response in a different field. For example, synesthetes taste colors or hear textures. The manifestations of synesthesia are wide and varied.

personal understanding of the material."[34] In this direction, the team views artistic exhibition as "a provocation of sorts that is used to create opportunities for extending discourse, often between people who would otherwise rarely, if ever, engage."[35]

(Fig. 10) Camryn Maher, *7 Shades of Longing (one for every letter in your name.)*, installation shot, 2022

My 2022 installation *7 Shades of Longing (one for every letter in your name)* and my 2023 installation *Wait.* implemented this method of engagement. In these installations, I used collage, found ephemera, assisted ready-made objects, and paintings to explore concepts linked to feelings, memory, and time. I used light and color to create a physical environment in the exhibition space where the viewer could be visually and physically confronted with my concepts in feeling and practice.

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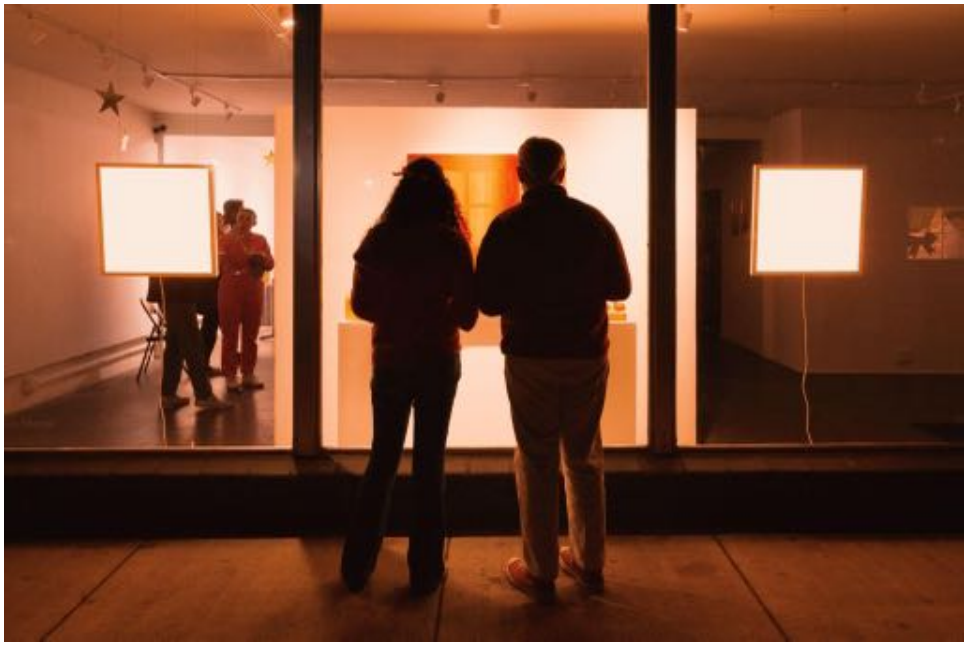
34 Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson, *You Must Carry Me Now,* 15.

35 Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson, "Snæbjörnsdóttir / Wilson."



(Fig. 11) Camryn Maher, *Wait*, installation shot, 2023

Relatable human experiences (longing, yearning, loss, waiting) engage the viewer in a space where they must encounter objects that elicit their own emotions, memories, and experiences on the subject. In these spaces I facilitated 1. The complex multilayered encounter with 'fauna', and 2. A personal understanding of the material that would ultimately lead to a provocative installation fostering insight for the viewer to understand the powerful role color can play in feeling through unforgettable experiences.

Results and Connections

Contact with a viewer is a meaningful and positive asset to my artistic practice. This contact allows the viewer to build an understanding of what's in the work and be impacted. This impact in turn leads to different manifestations of individual agency after encountering the work. When research has been done, and when the materials have been carefully chosen, the

way in which I choose to use them becomes extremely important, and it will make or break whether or not I am able to form a successful connection with a viewer.

My 2024 work *Absence* is a sculptural installation of ephemera and stories exploring the emotional theme of absence. The installation consists of collected objects representing the lingering traces of absence felt by three different people and a recounting of their three individual experiences.

(Fig. 12) Camryn Maher, *Absence*, ephemera and collected stories, 2024

For this work to properly resonate, it was important to select objects that would engage the viewer with feelings of something forgotten, left behind, and filled with quiet yearning. I asked over 25 people to submit their experiences of holding onto objects in the wake of change. The three stories I selected featured (respectively) the memory of a bee landing on a bouquet of flowers, a picture frame with broken glass, and a bar of soap. In my emotional synesthesia absence is consistent with a yellow-gold. In my recreations of these objects through the use of assisted readymades, I made careful alterations to change their color to this consistent theme.

This material choice aided in reflecting the objects' role as emotional vessels, connecting to our experiences, our memories, and passing time.

(Fig. 13) Sarah Cameron Sunde, *36.5 / A Durational Performance with the Sea*, video stills from performance, 2022

Emotions create a connection point and make artwork personal, relatable, and persuasive. Emotions allow for a feeling of mutual understanding and kinship, rather than a rote processing of visual and sensory information. Emotions drive thoughts, thoughts drive actions, and actions drive change. Artist Sarah Cameron Sunde's ongoing work *36.5 / A Durational Performance with the Sea* engages these ideas. The piece consists of nine site-specific and participatory performance works where Sunde stands in the sea for an entire tide cycle, usually 12-13 hours, and invites others to join her. The work is documented through timelapse video and presented as a long-form cinematic work alongside collected ephemera specific to the performance locations.

According to Sunde, the work "began with an impulsive poetic gesture in response to Hurricane Sandy's impact on New York City – standing in water for 12 hours and 48 minutes

while the tide rose and fell on [my] body." By continuing to create these works around the world, with more planned for the future, she says she hopes "each individual that encounters the project will consider their contemporary relationship to water, as individuals, in community, as a civilization, and as a species."[36] Informed, emotion-based and research-led artwork accesses people on a level entirely their own. It breeds hope, encourages participation in critical problem solving and open spaces where change can take place. It is a key element of artwork that drives solutions to complex issues.

(Fig. 14) Leonid Tishkov, *Private Moon*, 2003

Artist Leonid Tishkov also embodies many archetypes of emotional access points. Covering the poetic and the metaphysical, Tishkov employs a variety of mediums such as installations, sculpture, video, photography, works on paper, and books in his practice. His multi-decade installation Private Moon[37] is an example of the emotionally evocative

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[36] Sarah Cameron Sunde, "36.5: About," 36.5, 2023, https://www.36pt5.org/about/.

[37] Leonid Tishkov, "Private Moon," Leonid Tishkov, 2023, https://leonidtishkov.com/private-moon.

combinations of folkloric references, magic, ritual, light, space, and outdoor presence. From 2003-2017, the artist installed and photographed an LED Moon sculpture in countries and continents around the world. The installation tells the story of the moon who fell to earth and the man who found her and vowed to protect and take care of her for the rest of his days.[38] Tishkov's work is grounded in research tied to his Russian background and folkloric knowledge, and activated by the romance and emotions implied through his concepts, mediums, installation design, and execution.

(Fig. 15) Camryn Maher, *love you to death*, durational performance, 2023-2024

My 2024 work *love you to death* is emotionally and materially recognizable in both Sunde's and Tishkov's work. *love you to death* is a durational, location-based performance piece. In the work, I document myself engaging with and swimming in a body of water in need of local conservation efforts and consideration from its community members. The work takes place during the eight harsh months of the fall, winter, and spring seasons in the Lake Tahoe

[38] Ibid.

region. The work is meant to engage the viewer emotionally through the outdoor presence and presentation of my compassionate interactions with the place. The work employs a visually poetic ritual to reimagine what more mindful actions of care with the environment around us can look like.

SECTION 3: Ecological Being

Explaining Ecological Consciousness.

Ecological Being begins with understanding where we come from and how we exist. This is categorized under a concept known as ecological consciousness. Ecological consciousness designates how we define nature, how we position ourselves in relation to nature, and how we view and place value judgments upon other species in relation to ourselves. Gaining ecological consciousness is an important and essential part of making positive actions against the climate crisis. Just as we are taught human social consciousness, and an awareness of the other humans we share our societies and cultures with, it exists for us to learn an ecological consciousness, to understand the other species and entities we share our planet with. Ecological consciousness provides a foundational addition to our pre-patterned structures of thought. It's a key ingredient toward the formation of positive and sustainable solutions to complex issues that ensure beneficial outcomes for every species involved.

An overarching lesson of ecological consciousness is the idea that human beings are an inherent part of nature, with nothing separating us from it. James Balog has theorized much of his artistic practice on the idea that nothing removes human beings from being an inherent

element of nature, saying “Nature is within us and around us, in the air and water, in the living sinew of the human element…There is no meaningful organic boundary between people and nature.”[39] Understanding our position within nature or as part of it is also influenced by our ideas about what nature actually is, and everything the word “nature” encompasses.
To gain an ecological consciousness, we must unravel many long-held ideas about nature and understand how our perceptions influence or contradict reality.

We understand differing human views about nature by examining how we place value in nature. How we place value will determine how we act. Biocentrism is a manner of valuation that emphasizes the value of each individual species. With a biocentric approach, all living things are given equal consideration. Ecocentrism is a way of placing value that champions the ecosystem as a whole, and not the individual. Ecocentrism turns away from human-focused points of view in favor of other ecologies. Anthropocentrism is a way of valuing nature that highlights only what nature can offer to humans. Anthropocentrism also involves the belief that only human beings can make value judgments.

My artwork is sensitive to the ways in which I place value on nature. I often value a biocentric approach, as with my work focusing on the individual importance of endemic plant species or endangered butterflies. My more recent work, like *love you to death*, prioritizes an ecocentric approach, painting myself as a member of a larger ecosystem amidst other species and entities who hold equal value to me. By defining and understanding some of the different forms of valuation on nature, we establish a foundational fact that nature’s very constitution is

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[39] Balog, *The Human Element*, 34.

as much determined by an individual's point of view as it is otherwise known for being an unchangeable aspect of existence on our planet.

William Cronon defines the human idea of nature in his 1996 publication *Uncommon Ground*. One of Cronon's key theories is his establishment of our conception of nature as a profoundly human construction. He asserts that our own values, opinions, and assumptions are inseparable from the way we describe and understand nature. Cronon argues that "nature" as we've always known is very "unnatural."

> "Recent scholarship has clearly demonstrated that the natural world is far more dynamic, far more changeable, and far more entangled with human history than popular beliefs about 'the balance of nature' have typically acknowledged. Many popular ideas about the environment are premised on the conviction that nature is a stable, holistic, homeostatic community capable of preserving its natural balance more or less indefinitely if only humans can avoid "disturbing" it. This is in fact a deeply problematic assumption."[40]

Understanding this, we can change our perspective to accommodate new methods of thinking and problem solving around this idea. Cronon continues, "The work of environmental historians has demonstrated that human beings have been manipulating ecosystems for as long as we have records of their passage. The way we describe and understand that world is so entangled with our own values and assumptions that the two can never be fully separated. "[41]

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[40] William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, 24.

[41] Ibid. 25.

Scholarship like this urges us to question cultural constructions of nature and the environment and consider how they might change when we recognize these insights. Cronon challenges us to ask ourselves, “What would a more historically and culturally minded way of understanding nature look like, which would take seriously not just the natural world but the human cultures that lend meaning and moral imperatives to that world?”[42] He asks, “Can our concern for the environment survive our realization that its authority flows as much from human values as from anything in nature that might ground those values? If yes, how can a more self-critical understanding of what we mean by nature enhance our efforts to protect the environment in ways that are both sustainable and humane?”

My 2023 work *The World Is Beautiful Without Me In It* explores these human cultural constructions of nature. The goal of the project was to demonstrate the inherent association we place between the visual beauty of nature and its understood value. I questioned the view many humans carry that in order for us to understand the beauty of something, we have to witness it for ourselves. These methods of thinking lead to negative physical impact on non-human ecologies. *The World Is Beautiful Without Me In It* partners a lack of visuals with auditory memories of natural areas and targeted questions to urge viewers to consider the impact they’re making, and why it is or isn’t necessary for them to do so.

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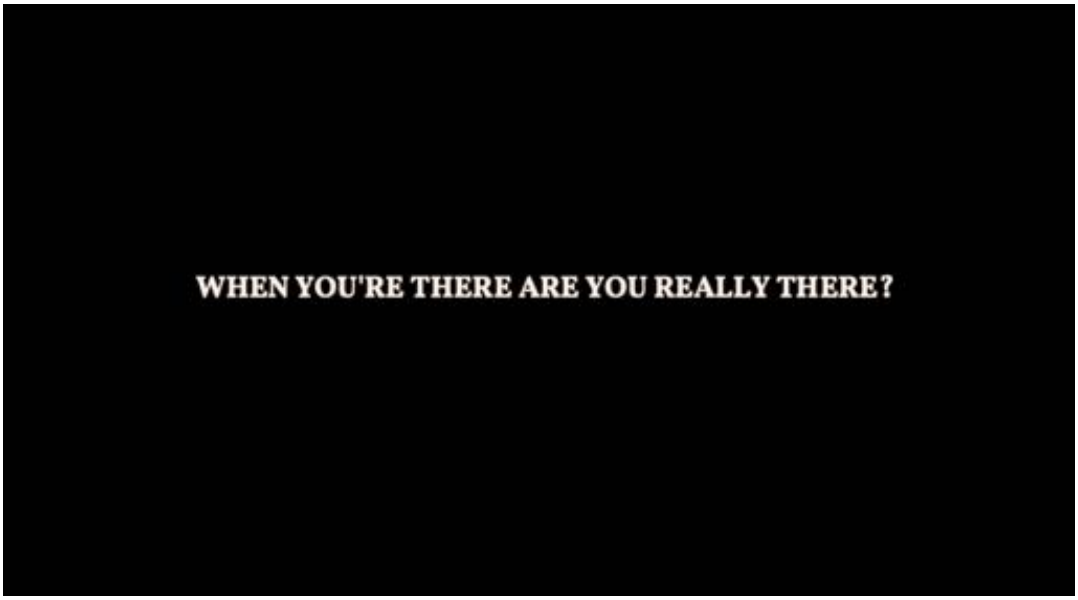
[42] Ibid. 25 -26.



(Fig. 16) Still from *The World Is Beautiful Without Me In It*, 2023

In this project, I traveled on foot to different natural areas in the Lake Tahoe Basin. I left a small recording device in a conspicuous place and moved far enough away that I could not see or hear the area I was recording. I waited and allowed enough time to pass for activities to resume their normal status without my physical attendance. Then, I left the device to record freely, and returned to collect it at a later time. All of this was done in an effort to document the sounds of these areas without my presence. The audio files I collected were compiled alongside a series of written questions meant to ask the viewer to examine their valuation of nature. These were presented in video format, despite them lacking any stimulating visuals to accompany the audio.

There are inherent structural imperfections in this work. For example, one must consider that it would be nearly impossible to actually record an ecosystem of this sort in its natural state, lacking any human interference whatsoever. The very implication of such an idea is surveillance, which carries with it its own negative suggestions of voyeurism and disingenuous

scrutiny. Additionally, the lengths one might go to in order to achieve such a task would necessitate some amounts of concealment and secrecy. In an effort to understand nature on a level entirely separate from human impositions, this would begin to feel like an insincere effort to deceive other species into remaining unaware of human impact entirely. The work becomes self-fulfilling in that we can never really witness a true nature immune from our human presence. This then creates a stronger call for us to be conscious of the impact we *are* making, engineer ways in which we can exist *with* nature, not in spite of it. Or, ways in which nature can exist with us, not in spite of us.

(Fig. 17) Still from *The World Is Beautiful Without Me In It*, 2023

As we understand our placement in nature, or moreso the fact that we are in no way separate from it, ecological consciousness continues to guide the deeper interactions we make within that nature. When we are conscious we understand who we share our world with, we can consider them in our actions. Our awareness of our shared existence facilitates a need for understanding, reciprocity, and respect between species. It calls into question our inclinations

and actions. This helps us understand when a better way of existing and moving through the world is necessary. Our consciousness turns our mutual cohabitation with other species into a coexistence as it is fed by understanding, compassion, and future forward thinking.

Complex Ecologies and Multispecies Coexistence

Recognizing how human consciousness and valuation have shaped ideas about nature and the way we approach it in ecological, social, and personal senses lead us to discern how other human constructs and ideals continue to influence our interactions with the environment. This has occurred to the point where even the way we position ourselves in accordance with universal timescales is influenced by our human-centric point of view. The Anthropocene is defined as our current geologic epoch, and is viewed as the point in time where humans have had the most profound impact on climate and the environment. Though referential in some senses to a "power" or "might" of humanity in being able to domineer the outcomes of life-as-we-know-it on planetary bodies, this anthropocentric, human-elevated method of thinking and defining time overlooks many of the other vast and complex ecologies we share this planet with.

Author and enviro-feminist theorist Donna Haraway proposes the "Chthulucene" as the era that follows our human-established epochs of the "Anthropocene" and the "Capitalocene." In her imagined and radically inclusive future vision outlined in her book "Staying With the Trouble",[43] the Chthulucene describes the times we currently live in, where human and non-human species are trapped together on a dying planet facing an uncertain future. The

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[43] Donna J. Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

Chthulucene plans for more than just a human future, and urges us to look beyond ourselves and consider how we might, in tandem with the others whom we share our planet with, make the best of what we are given and "stay with the trouble" together. In attempting solutions toward these complex problems, Haraway implements thinking that highlights the diverse and interconnected relationships that shape our world. She imagines a more collaborative, culturally-minded, and creative future for ourselves and others on this planet.

Haraway's envisioned futures in "Staying With the Trouble" act as one example of creative problem-solving geared toward multi species coexistence taking place in ecologically-minded contemporary art. Haraway recognizes a key aspect of these collaborations and interactions that our complex and intertwined ecologies demand from us. Open-mindedness, creative solutions to complex problems, and a willingness to change, and to try, are essential to transforming the way we exist and coexist on this planet. As we traverse the landscapes of social tumult, ecological precarity, and uncertain futures, the requirement for us to confront the realities of our interconnected world grows larger.

My 2024 work *love you to death* accesses themes of multispecies collaboration and creative approaches to coexistence. As I engage with the body of water in this work, Lake Tahoe, I view myself participating in a collaboration with the lake. Many of the pieces of art in this work implement equal material input from both myself and the lake.

(Fig. 18) Selection from *meeting you changed me forever*, part of *love you to death*, 2024

In the series *meeting you changed me forever* displayed within *love you to death*, I share photos taken of experiences during my performance with the lake. These photos are taken on 35mm film, which allows for a sculptural and material interaction with the place. After shooting photos, I dismantle the film capsules and submerge the photos in a small amount of lake water collected at their time of capture. The photos are chemically altered by the lake water, dried, printed, and resubmerged in lake water. These photos are taken and selected by me, and changed by and displayed by the lake. *meeting you changed me forever* demonstrates a creative approach to collaboration and a mindfulness toward coexistence, as this work exists because of the equal impact from both myself and the lake.

By gearing our valuations of nature to cultivate multispecies collaboration and the forging of alliances across diverse communities, we can see a better path forward: one more considerate of the many others whom we share our world with. Recognizing our

interdependence on these others allows us to influence and be influenced by them, and consider them in our creative endeavors. By embodying and embracing speculative thinking, making kin, storytelling, and viewing ourselves as part of the Chthulucene, we can imagine a future where staying with the trouble is not only a necessity but a profound action of co-creation.

Art and Ecological Being in Symbiosis

Artists play a key role in developing ecological consciousness toward the multispecies symbiosis. My artwork like *Endemic Ghosts* demonstrates a sensitivity to biocentrism and the individual importance of other species. *The World Is Beautiful Without Me In It* calls us to question our intentions with and rights to witnessing in nature. *love you to death* reimagines coexistence through a conscious collaboration between myself and a body of water, offering a creative solution to achieving symbiosis. Through interdisciplinary lenses like these, we can examine further how the functions of art embody key concepts of Ecological Being.

Art opens our eyes to others we couldn't see before. Artist and writer Regan Golden engages this function of art in tandem with Ecological Being and symbiosis in the 2019 project *Seeing Plants: Vision, Botany and Contemporary Art*. *Seeing Plants* is a collection of essays in which Midwestern artists were challenged to explore the role of plants in their practice and describe times in which plants appeared at the center of their lives. Functioning as the editor for the project, Golden contributed her own essay, *Sight, Site and Motherhood: Missing Mosses,*

Pulsing Trees and Blinding Flowers,[44] to the collection where she speaks about parenthood, body and artmaking in the framework of environment, nature and plants.

(Fig. 19) Regan Golden, *Spring Ephemerals*, 2014

In *Sight, Site and Motherhood*, Golden describes three experiences. She first details the similarity of an ultrasound image to a mossy cave, and with it the wonder and comfort Golden is able to associate with the inner workings of her own body as she grieves the loss of a pregnancy. Later, through a bout of the disease Labyrinthitis, the willow trees in her home environment become a way in which she can orient herself to the new appearance of her surroundings and find beauty and a sense place within it. Lastly, after suffering a severe allergic reaction in the urban forest at the edge of her property that temporarily causes her heart to stop, she is reinvigorated with a newfound sense of life, in the face of near death. Each of these experiences is a way in which the author, in her own right, demonstrates the inseverable

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[44] Regan Golden, "Sight, Site and Motherhood: Missing Mosses, Pulsing Trees and Blinding Flowers," Mn Artists, February 2021, https://mnartists.walkerart.org/sight-site-and-motherhood-missing-mosses-pulsing-trees-and-blinding-flowers.

connections between her environment and herself, and the changing roles she and the species inside it have in giving life and taking it away. By showing herself as a part of nature, and a part of the ecosystem that surrounds her, she is responsible to speak about it, care for it and do justice to it because it is a part of herself.

Art gives a voice to those who don't have one. Artist Olafur Eliasson implements this function of art in consideration of non-human entities in his 2014 project *Ice Watch*.[45] As an artist, Eliasson blends emotion, perception, and cognition in his large scale installations that examine the functions of life on our planet. Eliasson implements the use of light, water, time, space, and other elemental materials to realize his work. *Ice Watch* was initially created for the 2014 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Fifth Assessment Report in Copenhagen. Since its first iteration, it has been repeated and includes coinciding installations with climate change summits at COP21 in Paris in 2015 and COP24 in Katowice in 2018.

In the installation, 12 blocks of glacial ice were transported from the arctic sea and left to melt publicly in the formation of a clock. The work is referential to time running out on climate change, and the consistent refusal of governmental bodies to do anything about it. The work is problematic in its own right, with little acknowledgement being given to the carbon footprint produced by a work that is meant to speak against such an impact. However, it remains a relevant example of Ecological Being in service of non-human recognition in our governmental bodies and collaborative action between species toward a multi-beneficial collective future.

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[45] Olafur Eliasson, "Ice Watch," Studio Olafur Eliasson, 2022, https://olafureliasson.net/artwork/ice-watch-2014/.

(Fig. 20) Olafur Eliasson, Ice Watch at Place du Panthéon, Paris, 2015

A particular effort of the piece was the push for inclusion of glaciers in legal and constitutional norms. Ice Watch directs us to take into account that "more-than-human interests and voices in reimagined forms of democratic assembly may require the development of novel approaches to representation…in order to provide meaningful protection of the rights of vulnerable glaciers, a radical transformation of the global economic and political order is required that may yet avert catastrophic climate disaster."[46]

Eliasson also implements theories of James Balog in practice as his work explores the impact we as humans have on earth's elements, and the impact they have on us. Similarly, we can see aspects of the Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson approach to exhibition methodology as Eliasson

[46] Drabble, *Along Ecological Lines*, 60.

hosts within his work 1. A complex multilayered encounter with fauna and 2. A personal understanding of the material. And even in connection to the David Haley terminology of "capable futures", says the artist:

> "The blocks of glacial ice await your arrival. Put your hand on the ice, listen to it, smell it, look at it – and witness the ecological changes our world is undergoing. Feelings of distance and disconnect hold us back, make us grow numb and passive. I hope that Ice Watch arouses feelings of proximity, presence, and relevance, of narratives that you can identify with and that make us all engage. We must recognise that together we have the power to take individual actions and to push for systemic change. Come touch the Greenland ice sheet and be touched by it. Let's transform climate knowledge into climate action."[47]

Ecological Being in Practice

The work of Golden and Eliason provides grounds for practicing Ecological Being in my own art practice, as I combine an awakened ecological consciousness with a sensitivity toward inter-species shared existence. Golden and Eliason both implement the use of emotional access points and creative approaches to imagery that are relevant and echoed in areas of my own work. My capabilities in Ecological Being allow me to form creative solutions to complex problems in service of capable multispecies futures, addressed through my art. In my approach I implement recognition, participation, and a sensitivity to responsible coexistence.

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[47] Olafur Eliasson, Ice Watch London, 2018, https://icewatch.london/.

My 2022 project *The Life of the Desert* examines the behavior and lives of 30 critically endangered species in the Great Basin, and the greatest threats to their existence. This project stemmed from a year of research where I was privileged to be a research assistant at the Center for Art and Environment at the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno, NV. My time at the center was spent studying the history, habitats, and behavioral patterns of endangered non-human species in the Great Basin. I placed an emphasis on recognizing and recording when the habits of these species reflected human habits and emotional and behavioral tendencies. A portion of my research was dedicated to learning about the history of humans in this area and its negative long standing effects on ecosystems due to a lack of education, awareness, and mindfulness. *The Life of the Desert* employs in practice an effort made on my part to accept that regional human inhabitants of the past made choices in accordance with the knowledge and resources they possessed, and it is my responsibility to act where I'm able to make a better choice for the future.

After studying the behaviors and habits of these species, I selected 30 critically endangered focus species. All species are native to the Great Basin and some are endemic, including trees, plants, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, birds, insects, and fish. I then searched for and paired a human emotional attribute with each of these species. For example, the Pinyon Jay, described as being highly social and flocking in large family groups, sometimes of over 200 birds, suffers heavily from predation. However, tactics such as nesting together, traveling in groups and flock members acting as lookouts have helped to deter predators. According to this behavioral pattern, the human emotional attribute assigned to the Pinyon Jay was Loyalty.

(Fig. 21) Camryn Maher, *The Life of the Desert*, 2022 - data sheet, excerpts, and examples

As the project continued, I created artwork to represent each of the species, drawing on colors significant to the species' physical appearance and colors I associated synesthetically with the paired emotional attributes. *The Life of the Desert* was realized as a hand-bound book with layouts featuring combinations of colors, illustrations, segments from behavioral studies, and associated words. By creating artwork to represent each of these species as individuals, relating human qualities and attributes based on studies of behavior and partnering these findings with intuitive color associations, I was able to amass a visually gripping presentation of the lives of, patterns of and threats to each of these species in a characteristically human way, creating a relatable emotional access point for a broader audience through the vehicles of emotion and color. *The Life of the Desert* was my approach to understanding and finding resonance with characteristics and ways of being in species unlike my own. This project has continued to take the forms of publication and installation in its lifespan.

My project *love you to death* explores differing human value placements between our relationships with members of our own species, and our relationships with members of other species. In line with theories of ecological consciousness, our social and emotional tendencies, habits and norms inform the way we act within these relationships. How we treat others in human relationships suggests how we act toward the non-human counterparts of our non-human relationships. *love you to death* asks questions like: How do you treat everyone and everything we share this planet with? Would you treat your grandmother or your best friend the way you treat a mosquito, a species of plant growing along the side of a road or a mammal trying to cross one? Would you consider a trusted friend in your actions the way you consider actions that pollute or harm the air and oceans?

(Fig. 22) Camryn Maher, *love you to death*, 2024

With *love you to death*, I explore long-term compassion and commitment to ecological spaces through an 8-month durational performance project with Lake Tahoe. In this

location-based performance, I travel to the lake and submerge myself fully under the water once per week at sunrise (barring serious illness or weather emergencies that prevent my travel). The performance is documented with photo, video, and ephemeral means of data collecting. These forms of documentation reference the actions I have taken and the time that has elapsed since the project's inception.

This project accesses tenets of ecological consciousness as I recognize a non-human body, a lake, as a "species" that is different from my own, but nevertheless deserving of the same care and access to a capable future as I am. I selected the body of water for this project because it is close to me, both geographically and emotionally. It is a species and a body I am in proximity with by nature of existence. In our chances to be near each other, I can utilize my ecological consciousness as I interact with and strive to understand this body on a level completely its own. In turn, I can use this knowledge and experience to inform my agency as I advocate for a more capable future for both of us, the lake and myself, in my actions and considerations.

SECTION 4: Social Being

"The climate justice fight here in the U.S. and around the world is not just a fight against the [biggest] ecological crisis of all time. It is the fight for a new economy, a new energy system, a new democracy, a new relationship to the planet and to each other, for land, water, and food sovereignty, for Indigenous rights, for human rights and dignity for all. When climate justice

wins, we win the world we want. We can't sit this one out, not because we have too much to lose, but because we have too much to gain."[48]

Political Ecologies

Work like *love you to death* engages with how and where we exist, and is influenced by the constraints of the world we are subjected to within this reality. Social Being builds on tenets of Ecological Being as it realizes how we interact with nature as a society, and where our power and detriments lie with this. Social Being grapples with our existence as members of larger ecologies while also existing in society, being subjected to social and cultural norms that demand our participation. Social Being encourages our engineering capable futures in spite of or in partnership with that world we're subjected to. It recognizes the dualities of our existence as strengths that enable us to work toward these capable futures through creative solutions to complex problems, smart and subversive actions, and thoughtful considerations of society's and ecology's interwoven potentialities.

> "Ideas dating back to the Enlightenment promote an understanding of the human species as separate from the rest, with the capacity of analyzing, dissecting and reorganizing natural resources for our own profit. The idea of growth that underlies our modern view of the economy is imagined without taking limits into account. And these assumptions, together with the techno-scientific capacities that we have developed, place us now at a crossroads with uncertain futures."[49]

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48 Demos, *Decolonizing Nature*, 29.

49 Drabble, *Along Ecological Lines*, 77.

We are subjected to human social and cultural norms from birth. They are deeply ingrained in our natures, and the ideas, values, and conceptions we inherit from this impact our relationship with and within larger nature. In our fight against the climate crisis, this affects our ability to develop creative solutions and negatively impacts our agency. It necessitates us developing a new human social consciousness that recognizes our crucial role as participating members of a larger ecology that seeks to co-create a better future for all species on our planet.

Interdisciplinary discourse revolving around environmental and societal challenges is saturated in the landscape of contemporary art. Diverse perspectives and viewpoints have shed light on areas lacking our attention but no less necessary for progress. Decolonialism, ecological politicization, and artistic exploration are just a few of the fertile grounds for inquiry and critique in these matters. T.J. Demos urges us to consider how these fields are interwoven with one another within the climate crisis discussion. He states, "Environmentally engaged art bears the potential to both rethink politics and politicize art's relation to ecology, and its thoughtful consideration proves nature's inextricable binds to economics, technology, culture, and law at every turn."[50]

The concept of political ecologies is key to understanding how the relationships between nature and society influence us, and the continued action they will require from each of us to overcome our tendencies and norms. The term 'political ecology' "acknowledges approaches to the environment that…insist on environmental matters of concern as inextricable from social, economic, and political forces…Political ecology recognizes that the ways we regard nature carry deep implications and often unacknowledged ramifications for how we organize society,

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[50] Demos, *Decolonizing Nature*, 8.

assign responsibility for environmental change, and assess social impact."[51] By recognizing the way we understand nature from a politicized point of view, we can deconstruct this viewpoint and determine what is helpful and what is not. In essence, by understanding the inherently political nature of our world structure, including the extremely politicized and biased ways we interact with nature and approach the preservation of its future, we begin to put a human face on the climate crisis. Rather than feeling helpless in the face of the realities of our present, we can engage and interact with those realities to work out alternate solutions to pressing challenges.

Decolonizing Nature and Empowered Responsibility

While reframing our understanding of reality in relation to political, economic, and social forces, we are still required to grapple with those factors beyond our control. In the wake of the Capitalization of the developed world, our beliefs and understandings about nature have been profoundly altered. The unequal power structures driving these channels of thought are partnered with the reality of colonialism in our collective histories. Colonialism was first referenced as a contributing factor toward climate change in IPCC[52] reports in 2022.[53]

> "In the most recent IPCC report, colonialism was not only identified as one of the drivers of anthropogenic climate change, but was also identified as responsible for climate change's disproportionate impacts on certain communities worldwide, especially

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51 Ibid.

52 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

53 "Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability," IPCC Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022, https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/.

> historically marginalized, ostracized and displaced peoples. Colonialism radically changed the natural world as we know it as Europeans 'discovered' the riches of the tropics and other continents, natural resources were intentionally, or many times also unintentionally, extracted and taken back to the metropolitan state or transferred on to other colonies where they still remain today."[54]

Furthermore, the effect of colonialism is inscrutable on our perceptions about "wild nature." Colonialism imbued us with the belief that pure, untouched, resilient wilderness existed in lands that were purported to be newly discovered when in fact they had been stewarded and altered by indigenous peoples for hundreds of years. William Cronon says, "The work of environmental historians has demonstrated that human beings have been manipulating ecosystems for as long as we have records of their passage."[55] These false channels of thought continue to have the potential for harmful impact on the environment today as "the advent of colonialism erased the histories, knowledge and biocultural diversity of Indigenous peoples in favor of Western knowledge and practices that still persist in ecological and conservation research today."[56]

Long standing ideas about wilderness, propelled by the long-standing effects of colonialism, contribute toward "a particular idea of nature - [one that is] bought and sold as a consumable experience. The peculiar tendency of many cultures in the modern capitalist world to view nature in this way is yet another kind of construction so comfortable that it seems

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54 Nussaïbah B. Raja, "Colonialism Shaped Today's Biodiversity" Nature News, October 2022, https://www.nature.com/articles/s41559-022-01903-y.

55 Cronon, *Uncommon Ground,* 50.

56 Raja,"Colonialism Shaped Today's Biodiversity."

utterly commonsensical, universal, and natural to those who inhabit it - no matter how problematic its consequences may be."[57] TJ Demos asks us to consider the meaning of environmental sustainability in conjunction with colonization and modern capitalism: whose interests does 'sustainability' promote and whose interests are excluded? Demo also theorizes that financialization is deeply entrenched in the value systems we place on environmental preservation.

> "...Nature became prey to the financial markets: transformed into an object of venture capital speculation, its value came to be defined economically based on the promise of profits as determined by derivatives in the stock market. Natural disasters have also been commodified according to this logic, whereby environmental crisis becomes first and foremost an economic crisis, to be addressed via economic means (in other words, to battle deforestation, we must financialize trees; to save rhinos, we must create a market for their horns)"[58]

In a political system slated to serve those who profit from it, our power lies in our knowledge and our actions. Demos places a heavy emphasis on the responsibility of the individual to wake up, participate, and change the tide of political ecology in favor of a future better suited to serve everyone. He warns, "The danger here involves deferring responsibility to scientific expertise and government authority in determining our collective response to environmental change, which makes us vulnerable to solutions forged by exclusive social, scientific, and political interests, and to the forces of commercial exploitation."[59]

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57 Cronon, *Uncommon Ground,* 46.

58 Demos, *Decolonizing Nature*, 105.

59 Ibid. 34.

With this as our current reality, when we've been given every reason to fail in overcoming the challenges that face us, it is our charge to understand that our past does not dictate our future. Though the choices of those who came before us lie outside our control, it rests with us to do and be something better. By changing the way we position ourselves in society in relation to nature, we become educated and empowered to act out in the face of governments and corporate entities who would prioritize profit over progress toward a more sustainable future. Questioning our world, our environmental structures, and exposing the truths surrounding political ecologies will aid us in the heavy work that lies ahead in our fight against the biggest ecological crisis of all time. As empowered decision-makers, we pave the way for a new way of life, uniting creativity, justice, and responsibility at a time when it is most needed.

Creative Solutions in Crisis

Many artists are engaging with political ecologies in practice. *Public Smog*, a multi-decade work by environmental artist Amy Balkin, examines the geo-political and legal structures that govern claims and ownership on the land and sky. *Public Smog* was an attempt to have the Earth's atmosphere listed as a protected site on the UNESCO World Heritage List. For the project, Balkan purchased and retired emissions credits, creating "clean air parks" in the sky above major cities internationally. In addition to the purchasing, the work manifested through photos and videos, the creation of websites, solicitations in the form of postcards submitted to international governments, and public lecturing and presentations to raise awareness.

(Fig. 23) Amy Balkin, *Public Smog*, 2004-2022

Balkan acknowledged the impossibility of her project to create a true "clean air space," and while doing so highlighted the irony of the refusal of most major governments to place protections on our Earth's atmosphere that are granted to sites with much lower bearing on human survival. Of the artist, TJ Demos writes, "Balkin's work [*Public Smog*] reproduces the financial practice of offsetting as a response to climate change only to reveal its specious logic, and ironic gesture to expose the inherent failure of attempts to marketize pollution to ameliorate global warming."[60]

Other artists recognize the duality of existence between our societies and our ecologies, and they propose creative ways to establish harmony and synchronicity with and within the forces that bind and influence us. Artist duo and researchers Lancel/Maat (composed of artists Karen Lancel and Hermen Matt) explore the relationships between technology, nature and our own biologies, and research and propose ways in which they might coexist. In their work, they design meeting spaces and manufacture public environments for participatory artwork wherein

60 Ibid. 111-112.

members of the audience who take part and engage become “co-researchers” alongside the artists. These spaces are also referred to as “artistic social laboratories.”[61]

(Fig. 24) Lancel/Maat, *Empathy Ecologies*, 2020

The 2020 piece *Empathy Ecologies* is “an interactive performance installation and hopeful narrative for future empathetic human-plant-technology connections.”[62] In this piece, the artists invite audience members to participate in an “empathy practice” with a hanging, aerial forest of white orchid blossoms and biofeedback monitors. CO2 and photosynthesis data is collected and recorded from the plants, while human participants wear EEG headsets that collect brain data as they kiss, caress and touch each other beneath the baroque-style plant life hanging above them. In real time, the data from both human and plant participants is translated and mixed into a live soundscape that creates an intimate, interactive environment for both

61 Karen Lancel and Herman Maat, “Empathy Ecologies,” Lancel/Maat - Empathy Ecologies, June 2020, https://www.lancelmaat.nl/work/empathy-ecologies/.

62 Ibid.

contributors and audience members. In this sense, the human and plant participants become co-creators in a new landscape of work.

The ideal future for our environment involves the creation of sustainable ecosystems, like the one brought to mind by this work, and too often this goal is dominated by the viewpoint that a sustainable ecosystem is one in which the human species must separate itself from the rest of the ecologies around it. Removing humans from wilderness through legislation in the name of preservation is not an effective way to address the environmental problems currently facing us. No matter the environments we live in, whether those be urban, rural, or even digital and technological environments, we have inborn ties to nature that must be developed to achieve harmonious multispecies coexistence in the face of social, economic, and political constraints.

Social Being in Practice

Themes of multispecies collaboration and new possible futures have increasing relevance in contemporary art practices. However, the theories held within these ideas of creative problem solving carry a more personal weight. In the face of biodiversity loss, climate change, and ecological challenges, we are sharing our future with all species for the good that it holds, as well as the bad. Donna Haraway describes this idea when she says, “There is a fine line between acknowledging the extent and seriousness of the troubles and succumbing to abstract futurism and its effects of sublime despair and its politics of sublime indifference. We require

each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations. We become-with each other or not at all."[63]

Our attitude toward the challenges we face is just as important as our effort toward overcoming them. A capable future does not only require our creativity and our commitment to try; it requires our dedication to understand who we are, and remember what we're working toward. A positive multispecies future will not be enabled by fear and despair. Openness to unexpected collaborations also demands a willingness to hope. By demonstrating a hopeful attitude toward collaborations, opportunities are presented wherein we might come together in new and unexpected ways, with a better future in mind.

(Fig. 25) Camryn Maher, *love you to death,* durational performance, 2024 - video still

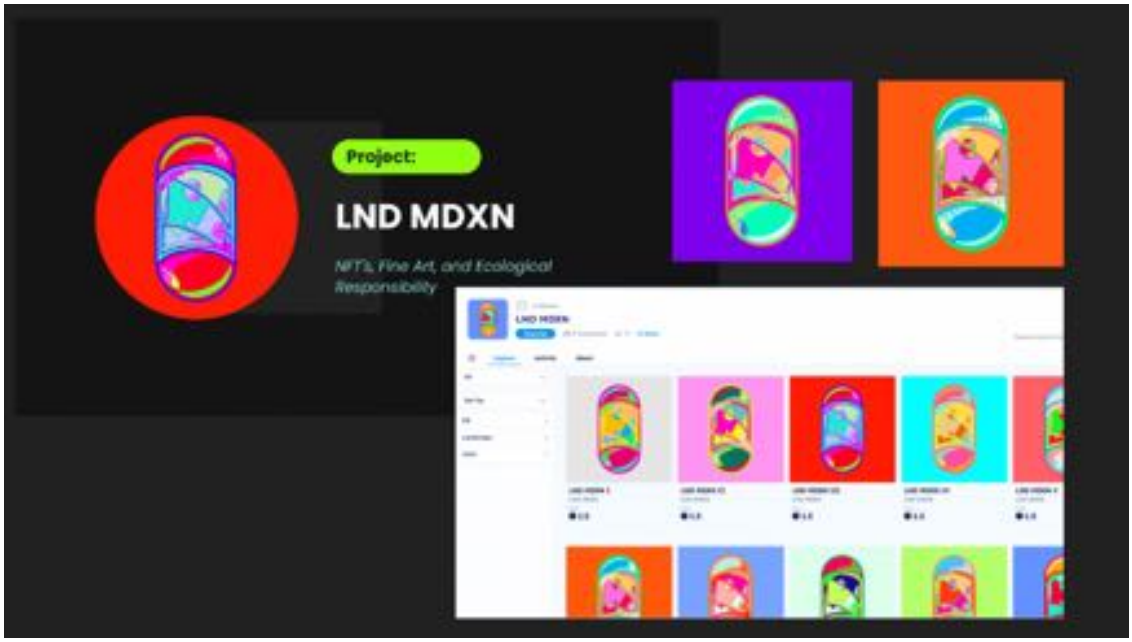
My work *love you to death* focuses on this commitment to collaboration. As I engage with Lake Tahoe in an enduring act of compassion and understanding, I am participating in a quasi-ritual with the lake and having an experience that is unique to me and the surroundings I

63 Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble*, 4.

am placing myself in. Myself and the lake are co-collaborators for this project, and it is providing me with experiences I cannot learn, attain, or understand on my own.

In turn, I am striving to return these actions back to the lake. With this work, I am demonstrating a need for increased commitment and compassion in our movements with the many others we share our planet with, especially those nonhuman members. A key consideration of this work is the simple fact that the action of one person cannot directly change the actions of many. It only has the power to influence and affect. My actions in this project create a model of what could be. They demonstrate a level of care and consideration that is less common than it should be in our dealings with multi-species co-inhabitors. They show a different way forward through an open method of thinking about ourselves in collaboration with the places we inhabit. They are an attempt at a creative solution to understanding species who aren't like us. They are a radical plea for others to understand the emotions and concepts in play, and apply them to their own situations. They are asking for a more ecologically conscious way of moving through and considering our surroundings.

Considering our surroundings also demands methods of Social Being to recognize that ecology is inherently politicized, and we are responsible to deconstruct harmful viewpoints to strengthen action and agency. By making work in a politicized environment and by nature of existence being exposed to the whims of a capitalistic society, I understand where I place myself within this system and what autonomy I have to adjust that placement.



(Fig. 26) Camryn Maher, *LND MDXN, 2022*

In my 2022 work *LND MDXN*, I use elements of exhibition and specific material choices to unpack the relatively new issue of detrimental cryptocurrency mining and NFT trading, and the negative impact these have on our planet's atmosphere in terms of carbon emissions. Individual pieces of crypto art, non-fungible tokens (NFTs), are at least partially responsible for the millions of tons of planet-heating carbon dioxide emissions generated by the cryptocurrencies used to buy and sell them. In addition, the energy produced by the machines used to mine, sell, buy and trade these currencies is resulting in greenhouse gas emissions that in some cases far surpass the carbon pollution produced by airplane flights.

In a world where individuals have both digital and physical personalities, we often find ourselves feeling separated from the consequences of our digital actions, or feeling like they don't exist at all. *LND MDXN* is a conceptually based collection of NFT's, created to examine the dire consequences of neglecting the outcome and wellbeing of our physical world in favor of the digital, and urge change in a more positive direction. It accesses an acute area of issue in our

society and in larger ecology, and subverts facts of political ecology - our interdependence on technology and the financialization of nature within changing currency systems - into assets that strengthen my artistic concept and propose creative solutions against these issues.

(Fig. 27) Camryn Maher, *LND MDXN,* 2022

The majority of time on this project went toward the research of sustainable NFT development, and finding a way in which to speak about these issues from relevant platforms with the most direct access, without further contributing to the issues in question. I found it of the utmost importance to create a public and living piece of art that would address a pressing issue at stake while fulfilling the terms of its existence. *LND MDXN* is housed on the platform SOLSEA, the first blockchain platform to offer individual licensing to creators and being 100% carbon neutral as of 2021. The currency used to create these artworks, SOLANA, " is extremely energy efficient. The most recent analysis from the Solana Foundation estimates that a single Solana transaction uses only 1,939 Joules, which is less than the amount of energy required to

complete two Google Searches. That is the equivalent of leaving an LED light bulb on (36,000 J per hour) for a little more than 3 minutes, or running your refrigerator (810,000 J per hour) for about 11 seconds."[64]

My material choices for this project were incredibly important. A digitally tokenized, living piece of artwork can speak about this issue in a way nothing else could. Throughout the artwork's lifespan, its existence actively contributes to the systems that are working to solve the issue about which the artwork was created. The materials inform the concept and create opportunities for deeper meaning and connection. The artwork is also widely accessible via the internet, a platform used by the majority of the world's population. This would not be possible in an alternate medium.

With the future of our planet looking more uncertain than ever, it takes the efforts of every individual to make the change we need. We must all work together to achieve a better outcome for the collective future. Intentional, action based methods of Ecological and Social Being are starting points to examine our actions in the past, to take responsibility for and rewrite our injustices in the present, and to seek better solutions for the future. By recognizing our fundamental interconnectedness with the environment, problem-solving for sustainable coexistence, and doing justice by other species and our own, we take steps forward one at a time with hope for everything still to come.

SECTION 5: Personal Being

64 "Solana Foundation Announces Blockchain Is Carbon Neutral, Thanks to Carbon Offsets," Solana, December 2021, https://solana.com/news/solana-foundation-carbon-neutral-2021.

"The sustaining creativity of people who care and act animates the action."[65]

The Strength of Emotion

Central to my thesis is the exploration of interwoven, activated methods of Being. Ecological Being outlines our ability to place ourselves within nature and within larger ecologies through understanding, recognition, and responsibility toward the other species in our world. Social Being empowers us to engineer creative solutions to difficult and multifaceted problems beyond our control, and to use the interlinks of society, economy, nature, and politics as assets to our efforts. Personal Being explores the emotion driving these efforts, and draws on the inherent power and agency we as a species possess as thinking, feeling beings.

Human acts of agency against climate degradation are voluntary and motivated by feeling. Research supports the stimulating influence of emotions in actions against climate change. A 1992 study found that climate action and commitment was increased by rousing feelings of hypocrisy and dissonance in participants when asked about their water consumption habits.[66] A 2017 study found that emotions like fear and anger could cause people of differing political ideologies to either increase their support for climate-positive policies they would normally oppose, or to reinforce commitments toward political climate actions for those who already supported them.[67] A 2021 journal explores research stating that positive emotions in

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65 Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble,* 5.

66 Chris Ann Dickerson et al., "Using Cognitive Dissonance to Encourage Water Conservation1," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 22, no. 11 (June 1992): 841–54, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.1992.tb00928.x.

67 B. Xie et al., "Positive Emotions and Climate Change," Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences, June 2021, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352154621000942.

service of climate mitigation produce productive engagement that leads to “upward spirals” of positive feelings and empowerment, driving a desire for climate action.[68]

Understanding the role of emotions in motivating climate action can help us plan better ways to utilize them in our efforts to speak about it. With respect to my artwork, I focus on emotions with the ability to empower rather than paralyze, like choosing hope over fear. I draw on my connections with the subjects of my work, connecting myself to the world around me in personal, positive ways. Sabine Roeser from the Risk Analysis Journal says “Emotions are a necessary source of reflection and insight concerning the [impact] of climate change. In addition, emotional engagement also leads to a higher degree of motivation than a detached, rational stance on climate change. Hence, emotions might be the missing link in communication about climate change, in a two-fold way: they lead us to more awareness of the problems and to being motivated to do something about climate change.”[69] Bear in mind, a wide variety of human emotions are elicited by the climate crisis. For every positive emotion like courage, empowerment, or hope, there are negative emotions like fear, anger, sadness, and discouragement.

Research continually shows that positive emotions are not the only indicators of climate support. However, simultaneous positive and negative emotions may interfere with one another and suppress actions of climate mitigation. Messaging about climate action, which surmises the ways in which we seek to activate agency and change, can both cause and be aided by rousing sustaining feelings of emotion and enablement. Solution-based messaging, which emphasizes

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[68] Sabine Roeser, “Risk Communication, Public Engagement, and Climate Change: A Role for Emotions,” *Risk Analysis* 32, no. 6 (April 22, 2012): 1033–40, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1539-6924.2012.01812.x.

[69] Ibid.

real actions and real results, are most successful in sustaining positive feelings about climate action while suppressing negative ones. From a 2023 study on emotions elicited by different types of climate messaging:

> "The solutions message, which has been highlighted as a promising way for climate messengers to engage audiences and has indeed increased the hope reported by participants, suppressed anger, sadness, and fear. The effects of messages across a range of discrete emotions should be considered during message design, especially how a message might be designed to elicit one type of emotion (say, hope) without decreasing other motivating emotions (such as anger). It may be especially important to communicate these messages in combination, communicating not only the hope we have for moving forward on climate change but also the reasons such actions are imperative."[70]

Emotions are powerful motivators in efforts to overcome environmental issues, but the way in which we invoke them influence the outcomes of our efforts. Though all emotions, both positive and negative, can facilitate action and produce results, positive emotions like hope and empowerment outweigh negative emotions like fear and anger in their ability to increase action without minimizing positive encouragement. In my art practice I value the capacity emotions like hope have to place confidence in our future. The essence of hope is present in many of my works, and is explored subtly in my 2023 work *Snowmelt*.

Snowmelt was a site specific, ephemeral installation about seasonal change and acts of care. In this piece, I facilitated a one-time, participatory performance wherein I peeled 12

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[70] Teresa A. Myers, Connie Roser-Renouf, and Edward Maibach, "Emotional Responses to Climate Change Information and Their Effects on Policy Support," Frontiers, July 2023, https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fclim.2023.1135450/full.

oranges as participants sat in a circle and shared stories about their first memories of care. The oranges were distributed among the participants.

(Fig. 28) Camryn Maher, *Snowmelt*, ephemeral installation and performance, 2023

I used this performance to guide my peeling and segmenting of 12 more oranges. I engaged with the acts of care described to me as I tied the peeled oranges back together with red pieces of string. I then froze the peeled and restructured oranges in molds to create a protective casing or "peel" of ice around each orange. These objects were placed outside and hung in tree branches to interact with the environment. Over a period of 5 days, the oranges were buried in snow, refrozen, and slowly melted until they became fully visible once again.

In this piece, my actions were modeled after profound acts of care. I placed embodiments of these compassionate actions in the form of oranges into the environment, and allowed them to interact with seasonal patterns. In *Snowmelt*, I show that underneath the influence of many forces, our acts of care hold strong. We can maintain a strong hope that our intention with these efforts will endure, and make a lasting impact. To summarize emotionally powerful, environmental artwork, James Balog says "This [work's] beauty is in the service of its urgent and highly cautionary message. But its tone is not that of a pessimist or scold. Instead, it

reflects the understanding that, of the many forces that motivate human beings, the most enduring and indispensable is hope."[71]

Compassionate Ecology

The emotional aspects of Personal Being have their own ties to larger ecology. This can be explained by the term "compassionate ecology." Compassionate ecology includes compassionate approaches to understanding nature, solutions for conservation, research practice, and multispecies coexistence. Emotional vulnerabilities are often seen as divides between us and other societies, or us and other species. Denying our emotions seems to be a common response to the realities of climate change, which appear cataclysmic. Compassionate ecology argues that these vulnerabilities are strengths which are fundamental to understanding and acting on environmental issues. Researcher Siri H. Eriksen says, "there is a fundamental dimension to vulnerability that the climate change literature has largely missed—that vulnerability is inherent in the connectedness in social relations critical to acting on climate change in an equitable and sustainable manner, both at local and global scales."[72]

In sections *Ecological Being* and *Social Being*, I outline my artwork's role in active existence that empowers solutions against environmental crises. I demonstrate understanding our position as an inherent part of nature, with a responsibility to forge alliances across species that reflect capable futures. I show how we work simultaneously with and against social, political, and economic factors outside our control that would inhibit our climate action and

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[71] Balog, *The Human Element*, 10.

[72] Siri Eriksen, "Is My Vulnerability so Different from Your's? A Call for Compassionate Climate Change Research," *Progress in Human Geography* 46, no. 6 (April 7, 2022): 1279–97, https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325221083221.

exclude creative solutions to complex issues. I use my work to access emotions that strengthen and propel our efforts for nature. At the root of each of these interactions is vulnerability.

We are vulnerable when we exit our comfort zones. We are vulnerable when we place concern for others above or equal with ourselves. We are vulnerable when we accept that past ways of working may need to change in the future. We are vulnerable when we don't know how to navigate toward a capable future, but we're willing to try. This vulnerability is informed by understanding, empathy, and compassion. Vulnerability is a common thread in my artwork. In *On Being 23*, I am vulnerable when I place my emotions on public display. In *love you to death*, I am vulnerable when I submerge myself in cold water in the middle of winter, allowing myself to be in full interaction with the natural elements. Of vulnerability, Eriksen says,

> "I recognize that vulnerability is existential and universal to the human condition rather than only relationally produced…Existential vulnerability is the origin of power and at the same time the limit to endeavors to resolve vulnerability. I depart from this view to explore a more dialectical interpretation of the universal condition of vulnerability, where vulnerability is not only centered on resolving inherent vulnerability, but simultaneously also constituting a positive force in producing social relations and well-being. I therefore align with emotional geographies that foreground human subjects as inter-dependent on human and more-than-human others, connections and actions arising from encounters that are fundamentally emotional and affective and 'guided by the subject's ethical sensitivity, responsivity and responsibility to earth others.'"[73]

[73] Ibid.

As we apply our vulnerabilities toward compassionate ecology, we must question where they come from, and what powers them. Suffering, pain, misfortune, discomfort, and sadness are all conditions of our existence. Experiencing these emotions allows us to extend empathy and compassion when we encounter others experiencing the same feelings. While we practice this in our own species, we can extend the same offerings to members of other species in order to use our vulnerabilities in service of larger ecologies. Dr. Lucy Weir, professor and specialist in dance and performance speaks about this in her book "Love is Green: Compassion as responsibility in the ecological emergency" she says,

> "Compassion, or love, is the most substantially evident, instinctive, rational and effective attitude that emerges when we reflect in detail on our own and indeed, on the universal situation that all systems are in. It is through allowing a compassionate attitude to be elicited by paying attention, or realization, that options for action emerge. The act of realizing what is happening right now creates just enough of a pause, a space, for compassionate attunement to occur, and this allows options to arise, or become evident, that would otherwise remain latent."[74]

We must learn the potential our emotions have to drive our actions. Our species' power lies in our abilities for emotional understanding and vulnerability. As we access this emotional potential in understanding, education, research, and practice, these types of inquiries become "transformative, paradigm shifting experiences that help [us and others] connect to the more-than-human world from a place of compassion and awe… Instead of seeing the more-than-human world as something to be controlled, [we] see it as part of [ourselves] and

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74 Lucy Weir, *Love Is Green: Compassion as Responsibility in the Ecological Emergency* (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2020). 18.

understand our need for healthy affiliation with the more-than-human world on the visceral level."[75]

Empathetic Actions, Empowered Voices

Artists working at the intersection of climate change and art understand the need for transformative emotion and compassionate ecology in practice. Through methods of Personal Being, we understand that agency and actions are motivated by feeling. Emotions are the human access point, and art is the needful way to visualize this. My art consistently engages with emotion in service of informed agency as I present situations of personal data, environmental acts of care, and creative attempts toward coexistence across species. We all have feelings that attach us to our place in larger ecologies somehow, and art is a method of inquiry to access those connections and open doors of understanding, implementation, and practice. Artists leading these inquiries understand their ability to positively influence collective good comes from the capacity of individuals to make a better choice as they understand the potential they have to do so. The emergence of new ways of thinking about our relationship to the world structures around us provides the means to come by this understanding.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botanist, ecologist, and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, is an individual working to create and educate others about some of these new ways of thinking. In her collection of essays "Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants", she employs principles of ecological consciousness, emotional inquiry, and compassionate problem-solving. Kimmerer approaches nature through

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[75] Denise Mitten, "Connections, Compassion, and Co-Healing: The Ecology of Relationships," *Reimagining Sustainability in Precarious Times*, 2017, 173–86, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2550-1_12.

indigenous wisdom, scientific understanding, and ecological philosophy, and invites us to participate in seeing ourselves as one in purpose with the world around us. She teaches us to give, take what we need, understand, and connect in a hopeful vision toward a more positive future.

"Braiding Sweetgrass" discusses principles of mutual stewardship, in that as we care for nature, it will care for us back. This exchange of care creates an emotional access point to recognize how our ecologies love us back, through the giving of gifts, cycles of growth, and their contribution to the reciprocal, natural relationships we are constantly striving to form. To this exchange Kimmerer says, "It is human perception that makes the world a gift. A species and a culture that treat the natural world with respect and reciprocity will surely pass on genes to ensuing generations with a higher frequency than the people who destroy it. The stories we choose to shape our behaviors have adaptive consequences."[76]

In "Braiding Sweetgrass", Kimmerer links together the motivations of her work under the concept of the "Honorable Harvest." A staple indigenous teaching, the Honorable Harvest is referenced frequently throughout the book as a means of measuring and tempering our movements through nature, especially in search of sustenance. The Honorable Harvest emphasizes gratitude, stewardship, and the fostering of a deep respect for all species in their life-giving capacities. Kimmerer tells a story of searching for wild leeks to harvest for the homecoming of her daughters. She seeks them thinking the nutrients and minerals found within the leeks will nourish her daughters' bodies, and be carried with them as they eventually leave her side and resume their adult lives. While searching, she asks permission to harvest, pulls up

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[76] Robin Wall Kimmer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2020). Intro.

one of these plants, and finds it very unwilling to come out of the ground. Honorably, she concludes that it is not the appropriate time for the harvest, and she will try again when she feels more invited to do so.

In this simple story, Kimmerer reveals an important truth about this way of thinking. She urges us to fully consider the impact of our actions by saying "I am the woman with the basket, and how I fill it is a question that matters. If we are fully awake, a moral question arises as we extinguish the other lives around us on behalf of our own. Whether we are digging wild leeks or going to the mall, how do we consume in a way that does justice to the lives that we take?"[77] We do not always have such a direct impact on other ecologies to the extent that we will take away their lives, but the principle of this story can guide our actions in seeking to resolve larger issues through Ecological, Social, and Personal Being. The way we interact with our larger ecologies matters, as I demonstrate in *love you to death.* Our actions have consequences, and could be the defining factor between uncertain calamity or an ensured capable future for us all.

77 Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 213.

(Fig. 29) Oto Hudec, still from *Concert for Adishi Glacier*, performance and video, 2018

Other emerging responses to climate change elicit our emotions through visual means. Oto Hudec, artist and activist, explores climate change in his work through utopian visions and storytelling. Through solitary engagements with endangered landscapes, Hudec reconfigures notions of care and examines what alternating methods of multispecies cooperation can look like. In his 2018 piece *Concert for Adishi Glacier*,[78] Hudec performs a one-on-one recital for a Georgian glacier. As he performs, the sounds of his instrument and the sounds of glacial meltwater combine to create an impassioned and intimate performance between the artist and a non-human entity. The piece is presented in a film, with the video being captured from a distance so as not to interfere with the space where the performance takes place.

> "[Hudec's performance] seeks to transmit an empathetic gesture that recognizes the entangled fates of humans, animals, plants and other living organisms, as well as the physical forces and natural phenomena of the Earth. At stake here could also be a reconfiguration of the notion of care, which in contrast to the promotion by late liberal governance of self-oriented, consumerist and moralizing versions of caring, advocates its extension to more-than-human worlds."[79]

Personal Being in Practice

The work of Kimmerer and Hudec inspires me as I utilize methods of Personal Being in my artistic practice. Ideas surrounding ecological compassion and the use of emotion as a driver

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78 Oto Hudec, "Oto Hudec – Concert for Adishi Glacier," Web umenia, January 2022, https://www.webumenia.sk/en/dielo/SVK:TMP.1017.

79 Drabble, *Along Ecological Lines,* 60.

for action have always been a facet of my work. I show compassion through acts of environmental care in pieces like *Snowmelt* and *love you to death*. I propel the concepts in my work and forge connections with emotion in installations like *Absence* and *7 Shades of Longing*. I believe meaningful action comes from recognition, repetition, and ritual, and I see all these things as being methods of commitment. I embody these in my practice as commitments to ways of living and ways of being that produce unexpected collaborations, bridges of understanding, and dedication to creative solutions.

Many of the connection-seeking aspects of my work begin by examining the impact I have on nature, and the impact it has on me through creative collaborations. My 2023 work *love letters from the sun (you are the sun)* is a series exploring fleeting memories and the essence of bygone feelings. Process and materials create the emotional and collaborative access points in the work as I embed environmental interactions in the creation of these pieces.

(Fig. 30) Camryn Maher, *love letters from the sun (you are the sun)*, cyanotype and ephemeral collage, 2023

love letters from the sun is a series of ephemeral collages that combine collected objects, pressed plants, pieces of fruit in various stages of preservation, written phrases, and the light of the sun. I use cyanotype, an alternative form of photography, to make the collages UV reactive while also using digital photography and video to document the collages as they are processed by the sun. The written phrases come from my own though fragments and emotional. My video and photographic documentation are presented as the visual content of the work.

These collages evoke feelings of longing and yearning. The words and phrases I use in these pieces stem from my own experiences, and they are poetic and fragmented while reading like a love letter, or a one-sided conversation. The light of the sun causes these images to change from second to second, and (due to the nature of the cyanotype process) once exposed to the light, the image can never be returned to its former state; it is chemically altered. I am unable to complete these works without the influence of my environment.

I engage in a gentle collaboration with the sun as I sit outside and let these images interact with the environment. In this work, I am taking my innermost thoughts and feelings, or my most succinct visual expressions, laying them out to the elements, and leaving them to be transformed. There is a connection inherent in this between myself and my environment. These works are also a connection I extend toward the viewer. I am asking them to look, feel, experience, and understand. In return, the viewer can feel seen, heard, and understood. They can feel more deeply connected to their inner workings, the world that causes them to work that way, or the human natures they are prone to.

(Fig. 31) Camryn Maher, *don't go just yet*, cyanotype and collected ephemera, 2023

I further explore this process in more direct collaborations with my environment. In my 2023 series *don't go just yet*, I continue to use cyanotype and ephemeral collage to imagine what a conversation might sound like if the places we love could speak back to us. I use sensibilities of ecological consciousness and compassionate ecology to view landforms as a different species or entity from us. I create work that extends bridges of connection to these entities through a combination of my experiences, my emotions, and the intervention of the elements.

don't go just yet also relies on process and materials to justify its concepts. My focus location for the series is the Lake Tahoe Basin, as it is local to me and holds meaningful connections. When creating this work, I travel to the location and spend time there. I pay attention to the thoughts and feelings I have in that environment, and the words, phrases, and feelings that come to mind. I make every effort to be intentional about and sensitive to my presence in this area, and the meaning and impact of that. I spend time researching the native flora and fauna to understand the location I'm visiting. I collect fallen plant detritus, or

non-native and invasive plant species. As I am allowed to experience the life of this other entity, I in turn want to do justice by this interaction. I use the time spent, materials collected, and memories of my experiences to create work that imagines a place I love speaking back to me. Its questions are frivolous and strange, while also cautioning viewers to question their actions.

(Fig. 32) Camryn Maher, *love you to death*, durational performance, 2023-2024

My ongoing work *love you to death* is a continued exploration of collaborations with non-human entities, and their emotional potential for encouraging change. As I participate in my performances with the lake, I am allowed to experience the environment in a way I have never understood previously. Much of this project takes place during the winter months. The winter season in Lake Tahoe is known to be relentless and unforgiving. Within my locality, it is common practice to avoid the lake entirely during the winter months, favoring instead the beauty and tranquility of the summer season. It seems logical that a few months of waiting are a small price to pay to avoid the choppy water, frigid temperatures, and unparalleled amounts

of snowfall. However, this models an unsustainable approach to collaboration and solution-making.

I recognize my co-collaborator in this project, the lake, to be an entity in need of others' consideration for its ecological survival. It is threatened by a changing climate, invasive species, and a lack of human consideration. The lake faces an uncertain future, much as I do. Just as with many other species, it requires attention and visibility all of the time, not just when it suits us. By approaching the lake in both human-constructed favorable and unfavorable circumstances, I begin to gain an understanding of it on its own level. I advance this by placing myself in unfamiliar situations that yield unexpected perspectives. Much of the time, this means that I am outside of my comfort zone. I have a fear of water, and yet I submerge myself in it to connect with the lake. I think about the cold as an unfamiliar sensation, rather than something to fear. I understand the extreme weather to be essential to the yearly life cycle of the region. I find myself constantly surprised by the ordinary and unexpected beauty in the most treacherous conditions. When I am alone, hundreds of feet off the shore in the freezing waters of an ancient lake, I understand and I feel understood.

To encourage actions and choices that facilitate meaningful changes for our collective futures, there must be deep emotional persuasions in the work I'm creating. By understanding the life, circumstances, and nature of the species I am in collaboration with, I engage in a compassionate approach to research, practice, and results. I use acts of care and commitment to produce emotional connections that others will feel too. I use these emotional access points to demonstrate that creative and unexpected collaborations are needful and accessible in many different forms and iterations. Many times, this understanding can take place just by virtue of

our paying attention. “The contemplation of things as they are, without substitution or imposture, without error or confusion, is in itself a nobler thing than the whole harvest of invention.”[80]

Conclusion

There is an urgent need for action in addressing the problems we face in our modern age. As climate change, environmental degradation, and social, political, and economic challenges close in all around us, the importance of actions to the contrary cannot be overstated. As we confront these troubles, it’s imperative to step into our role as empowered individuals with the capability for agency and initiative. We all share a responsibility in ensuring a capable future for our planet, because that future is also waiting for us.

On our planet, we are members of large and infinitely complex ecologies. Our very existence designates our heritage and belonging in these ecologies. We are Ecological Beings. We are part of a greater nature and prone to certain natures. Instilled within us is a deep compassion connected to our understanding of where we come from. We are Social Beings. We are part of societies. We have agency to think, take action, and make decisions. We use our constantly changing circumstances to procure creative solutions to complex problems and work for a better future. We are Personal Beings. We have emotions, dreams, goals, hopes, desires, and most of all, potential. Our ability to feel and connect is the best tool we have to drive our agency and embolden our actions.

As Ecological, Social, and Personal Beings, we prove our existence to be an asset to solution-making. As individuals, we all have vital contributions to give toward reliable,

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[80] Balog, *The Human Element*, 26. Balog quoting Francis Bacon.

sustainable, and capable futures. Turning to my own experiences as an artist and researcher, I have shown with my work how my activated existence punctuates the transformative power of individual agency. In my work I use collaborations across disciplines and species, deep emotional connections, and profound acts of ritual compassion and care to foster positive ecological, social, and personal change. The connections I create across different dimensions of Being empower other individuals to take meaningful action in their own lives and communities. Whether through raising awareness, engaging understanding, or cultivating empathy, art has the potential to create transformative shifts in perception, behavior, and action.

The tools we need for change already exist within us. In the face of an unknown future, we must embrace the opportunity to forge a better path forward. A capable future is one where every voice is heard. A capable future is one where we coexist with the nature we come from. A capable future realizes a better reality than what was chosen for us in the past. A capable future anticipates space for dreams, goals, and hopes, respecting our home and all its provisions in the process. Our greatest strengths are the keys unlocking this future and making it possible. I am part of nature. I'm a human being. I feel things very deeply and this is where my power lies. I am you.

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