

## **“A Bright Orange Life Jacket, A Beacon, and the Promise of a Feast: What Makes A Socially Engaged Art Practice Resilient in This Time?”**

**A slide talk given at ONCA, Brighton, England**

Beverly Naidus

August 30, 2018

I wake up just before dawn with the smell of burning forests in my nose. I breathe in deeply several times, wondering if this is just in my imagination. The air conditioner is on in the bedroom, and so is an old air purifier from our LA smog days, but despite the incessant efforts of these machines, the smell is there.

I cannot sleep, so I get up, make some tea and look out at the eerie early morning light that has greeted us for several days. I am reminded of apocalyptic novels like *The Road*, where fires and smoke accompany the main characters, creating an awful twilight all day long, as they make their way through a dead and dying world.

I see a few people out with their dogs, there's not as many as usual. Maybe folks are finally listening to the health advisories. A young woman walks by, unmasked, seemingly unperturbed. And then a bicyclist zooms past with a N95 mask on. I am relieved. It is the first mask I've seen on anyone other than my family and a few friends since the smoke arrived. Within the next half hour two more bicyclists pass by, neither are masked. An email arrives from a local environmental activist who strongly encourages people to stay inside today, the AQI (air quality index) is 180 locally (unhealthy for everyone), and in some places further north it's over 200 (hazardous).

Later in the morning, I meet with an artist friend at a local coffee shop. I walk in with my mask on, as does my friend. At the same time, a mother and her young child exit the shop without masks, sit down at the café table outside, and leave the door to the café wide open. I rush to close it. The barista looks at us surprised, “why the masks?” We explain the dangers of the current air quality, and she sounds shocked, as if this has just penetrated her consciousness. She asks why this is happening, and now I am shocked that she and her coworker

don't know about the 1000s of wildfires currently destroying vast areas of British Columbia's forests. She says, "I guess I should look at the news."

A cartoon arrives via Facebook, it shows different areas of the US coping with disasters – the proliferation of ticks and Lyme disease in the Northeast, fires and poor air quality in the Northwest, more hurricanes and sea levels rising in the Southeast, and overwhelming heat in the Southwest. There is no place unscathed by the shifts. And the list of plagues could be so much longer.

I wonder how many folks are beginning to awaken from the privilege of denial, and how many are still sleepwalking.

Yesterday the winds came in, and I could see the shape of mountains on the horizon from my studio window. It felt like we'd emerged from a pressure cooker, a bit shaken and weary, but released all the same. On social media, my local friends cautiously asked if it was safe to open the windows again. Then this morning, despite an AQI of 33 (healthy), the smell of something burnt returned and by this evening the AQI is unhealthy again. It's expected to get "hazardous" by Monday.

I read another friend's post, "Shall we all buy air filters as we watch the world burn?" She was joking, but this kind of cynicism is pervasive now. And she has a point. Those with purchase power can get deluded, thinking that if they just buy "green" things, or things that "fix" the current discomfort, our ecological crisis will be solved.

Over a month has passed since I wrote those paragraphs, with astronomical amounts of carbon being released, with dozens of environmental protections turned back

Some people are also becoming aware of another change in the weather. As poverty, hunger and fear have increased, the status quo (corporate powers, the 1%) and Russian bots have been steadily manipulating the media so that we see each other as the enemy. People without critical thinking skills have had the reptilian part of their brains stimulated to an extreme and ancient anxieties about the "other" have emerged. They can't see how greed, power, climate change, and daily violence conspired to create the refugee crisis. They can't see the humanity in our displaced brothers and sisters. Walls are seen as solutions and reactionary movements have blossomed. For those of us trying to tear down

walls and celebrate difference this increase in hate-fueled hysteria is chilling to witness.

We are facing some huge challenges as a species. I'm sure I don't need to list any more tonight, and I expect many of you have felt these challenges in your bones. Some of us have known for some time that we were facing seemingly insurmountable odds. If we had the "luck" to be different and saw the mess for what it was from an early age, we wonder why so many are baffled why so many did not react or see what we've seen. With the experiences and knowledge that we had and have, how do we find the wherewithal to not self-destruct as we make our way through daily life? How did we adapt to such extreme cognitive dissonance, witnessing ecocide and oppression of all sorts? How did we manage not to be screaming in the street every day?

Art has been my medicine, my bright orange life jacket, so to speak, and no doubt it will continue to be. It's a terrain where I can face the ugliest of truths, including my self-deception. I can use art to witness the pain of humans with privilege suddenly discovering that their dreams of a happy, beautiful summer have been destroyed by fires and smoke. I hope that I am going to witness their awakening as well. I use this life jacket to express gratitude for daily beauty while my heart continues to reel from the news or observed reality. And it is always there to help me imagine the world we want to live in.

And I use my life jacket to float when I'm exhausted by what I and the collective are carrying. I recognize that it's an enormous privilege just to have one, which I am doing my best to help others have one. It is why I teach. Part of our work, as creatives and as activists, is to distribute more life jackets, so we can keep each other afloat.

My inspiring peers and our ancestors' wisdom are my beacons. Whether I am reading decolonized histories or witnessing a project that fosters pride and strength in oppressed communities, these beacons help me find my way in a very chaotic landscape. The artists trying to heal "nature deficit disorder," the writers who are reclaiming our history of successful activism, the teachers who offer calm in the storm through meditation exercises, the performers who bridge chasms with their ability to humanize polarizing situations, all of them are my beacons. We all need to find more of them and be nourished by them.

And nourishment brings me to my final thought: our feast is a promise that is already happening – we just need to take some initiative if it is not already

manifesting. It can start with an invitation to a neighborhood potluck, share the abundance from your own garden, develop art interventions in unconventional places, set up a temporary classroom in the park (guerrilla teaching), encourage spontaneous or well-organized gatherings of all sorts, and clown blockades of “business as usual.” This is the work now. Reclaiming the streets is not new, we just need more folks participating now. This is how we feed each other in very difficult times. Brainstorm more possibilities. Bring more members of your various communities whenever possible. There are people sitting at home alone and scared with untapped gifts. Coaxing them into the world again requires some patience, vulnerability and strategic thinking. This is our work now.

It’s not too late. You can read doomsayers like Guy McPherson and decide that we’re all gonna die soon in some climatic cataclysm and give up. His way of thinking seems to have inspired a group on Facebook called “Near Term Human Extinction SUPPORT Group.” One of my former eco-art students, a very bright trans woman, added me to the group. She thought I was a bit crazy imagining that we might somehow turn back the tide of climate disaster. She was certain that our fate was extinction, sooner rather than later. I was impressed by her confidence, but ultimately, I don’t find that point of view helpful to my mental health, my creativity or my ability to be effective as an artist, teacher, parent, or activist. I am more at home in the lusciousness of uncertainty. It’s very buddhist of me, I know. I thank Joanna Macy for that perspective – go look at her website, *The Work that Reconnects*, and read some of her books. She’s been my mentor for 35 years, since one of her books fell on my head.

Yes, part of my resilience comes from my ability to sit with the uncertainty of not knowing. I do squirm at times, and I grieve, rage, and get depressed, because I have a human heart and because a good deal of the science is quite scary. I worry about how enmeshed I am (flying, computers, driving, etc.) in a system that is profoundly ecocidal, and I invest in ways to even the equation: planting food and trees, supporting projects that do the same, and projects that are boycotting and blockading business as usual.

There are some factors that might shift the dominant direction away from extinction including our remarkable capacity to spontaneously offer kindness and come up with innovative solutions in a crisis. There’s also hard science that suggests we can solve the climate crisis through spreading organic farming far and wide and replenishing our soil, creating a healthy sponge for carbon sequestration and restoring the hydrology cycle. Read Grace Gershuny’s *The Organic Revolutionary* to learn more. And what would be particularly helpful is

the dismantling of capitalism with its focus on profits and greed at the expense of everything.

Extraordinary magic can manifest when we believe in the promise of a feast and come together to make it happen. We don't know which way the cards will fall, and until then we need as many of us doing the work as possible. Rebecca Solnit's "Hope in the Dark," gives many examples of people coming together to shift things that have happened in recent history, unexpected grass roots accomplishments that the corporate media has ignored deliberately.

It may be time for some of us to become the walking books that Ray Bradbury writes about in Fahrenheit 451 – although the books in our current world may not require burning since most people don't seem to have time or motivation to read any more. Still it is essential that we reclaim histories that have been lost, decolonize our own educations and find ways to create intergeneration and intercultural conversations about all of it. Art can be the bridge that initiate those conversations, and I promise you, it will be a feast.

Here's a list of some inspiring beacons:

1. La ZAD – direct action/utopic projects
2. Mierle Laderman Ukeles – making the invisible visible/sharing stories/creating connections between sanitation workers, street cleaners, people who clean for others
3. Christina Bechstein – working with and in communities that are marginalized (refugees)
4. Eve Mosher – making people aware of the dangers of sea level rising
5. John Jota Leanos – reclaiming lost histories and the legacy of colonialism and racism
6. Tashi Ko – remediating the damage of white supremacy
7. Extreme Makeover: The Creative Remediation of a Superfund Site – imagining a different future without fossil fuels and remediating the damage done by the later.
8. Indigenous Creatives – gathering communities to reclaim almost lost traditions
9. Studio Revolt – Documenting marginalized communities, including deported peoples
10. LaToya Ruby Frazier – photos/video/performance about environmental racism and healthcare inequity