

SO YOU WANT TO BE AN ECO-ARTIST? LESSONS IN GRIEF AND GRATITUDE

BEVERLY NAIDUS

We're sitting somewhere between the drought, the flood and the famine. You can feel the crisis in your bones, like an earthquake ready to hatch. And when you quiet your mind, you can see the darting, fearful eyes of the refugees fleeing the dust on their tongues. They carry that awful smell of blood and violence, and are fragile shadows, unthreatening in their fatigue. Complex identities peeled away by desperation. You are witnessing the last of a species doing its death dance and your eyes fill with tears. You cannot bear this reoccurring dream. You know that others are dreaming it, but most of them forget it as soon as they awaken and if the images drift in during their waking time, they distract themselves quickly. Too many emails to answer and delete, and there's another video to watch about another brutal act of violence. You want to shake the room, the whole damn city and country, especially the smug ones – How can they sleep at night? What will stop this runaway train?

But in the very same moment, you are gazing out the window and the light after the rains is creating jewels in front of you. You notice the sweet baby leaves sprouting on the majestic white birch outside your window. You see an abundant landscape of new growth in all directions, so generous this particular spring, and you wonder why you never took in all that loveliness quite so deeply before. As gentle, refreshing breezes envelop you with the perfumes of daphne and jasmine, you can't imagine a more exquisite moment. You breathe in deeply, filled with gratitude for the privileges of a full belly and running water, the comforts of home, loving friends, your favourite music on the laptop and easy access to so much – all of it precious. All of it right now.

These threads that you carry create a cognitive dissonance that without the first aid of art making is guaranteed to generate a headache that stretches from the occipital ridge to the trapezius, or perhaps something worse. You rationalise that it, making the art that is, may be a futile activity, relative to the needs of the planet, but at least you are one cell trying to communicate to others, and who knows what that process might generate? If nothing else, this one cell might find some balance in the midst of the chaos. And there's another first aid that is your birthright. Go outside and touch the earth. Pick up a rock and see what's growing underneath it. Inhale deeply.

LESSON ONE:

Always remember your ancestors, not just the blood ones, who gave your DNA its legacy and offered you this lifetime, but those even more basic ones, the stardust that inhabits every sentient and non-sentient being.

Sometime in the future, many generations from now, Flyer sits on the large and worn sitting stone. Its surface is typically cool and reassuring. But today she is weary and anxious. Nearby the whole band is humming a chant of gratitude. Flyer had disappeared overnight, and a search party had finally found her by late morning.

I was one of those kids who spent a lot of time alone, and when the weather was right, I was outside wandering through the undergrowth, talking to trees and bugs, nibbling herbs and grazing on berries. My first chore was taking out the compost. I loved watching the worms wiggling through the dirt that had formerly been kitchen waste. I would pick up the worms and give them names.

My parents, unreligious folks, kneeled on the ground to plant their seeds. Gardening was their therapy. City kids, they gravitated towards this process of growing food instinctively. Their lives had been filled with challenges, as had those of their ancestors. Growing food was survival, not a spiritual practice. But then they had this kid who talked to trees and shared her dreams at breakfast. My dad, the scientist, brought cutting edge technology into the garden, spraying the trees with pesticides to get a better yield. I began to get a persistent runny nose. I was teased for it, told that I was overly sensitive and given medications to try and calm the symptoms. There were some days when my body just couldn't be outdoors.

One day I discovered *Silent Spring* (written by Rachel Carson) on our family bookshelf. I never figured out how it ended up in our very meagre home library (books were to be borrowed from public libraries). I read it and began to worry.

LESSON TWO:

Allow yourself to tell your story. Otherwise those stories may become burdens and you might attract a chronic illness.

Flyer arrived back at the camp a total mess, clothing ripped, hair awry, bleeding from many scratches. Everyone wanted to know what happened, but she was too exhausted to speak. An elder intervened, brought her fresh water from the rain catcher, cleaned her up and rubbed calendula salve on her wounds and told her to rest.

So this is how I find myself in the studio, over four decades ago, having a party, of sorts, with my feelings, trying instinctively to head-off the onslaught of health problems. I tapped into my anxieties, my nightmares and things I knew to be crazy ass wrong: such as, the desire to turn all of our federal parks into a plunder party for the fossil fuel industry or the overwhelming stockpiles of nuclear weapons waiting for an accidental holocaust to occur. Drawings, scripts for audio tracks, interactive installations, proposals and street art would emerge and I would feel a little release, a calming of sorts.

Eventually I realised that I not only needed to process my sense of disconnect and discomfort, but I needed to find other folks who were equally aghast. I needed a cohort of equally alienated and upset souls. That I was called an activist for doing this startled me at first. I hadn't understood this process of finding voice as activism. Eventually I began to understand activism as something that one does not set out to do, but it emerges, often bursting forth, because it must.

LESSON THREE:

Telling your story will help you find others who feel similarly. You can offer each other support, if nothing else. But don't remain satisfied with that.

Flyer tried to sleep, but after tossing and turning for a while, she grew agitated as she recalled the night before. She moved quietly to her sit spot, wincing from a suddenly discovered bruise, glad to be around others. In the work area, the band was focused on their harvest. They had been foraging in the surrounding meadows with haste; her absence had delayed their routine. At first they didn't notice her presence just outside the talking circle. She liked this feeling of being unseen. It was comfortable, safe, unlike what she experienced the night before. She begins to meditate, holding an image of a giant Cedar tree in her mind's eye.

Decades ago, there were a few occasions when my work turned to celebratory topics. For instance, while rebuilding my interactive installation that depicted, in a surreal way, the aftermath of nuclear annihilation, my heart was saturated with feelings that were ragged. All I wanted to do was draw images of trees. I was a resident at the Blue Mountain Center, a retreat center for socially engaged artists and writers in the Adirondack Mountains of New York. Above my bed was a gorgeous, sensual drawing of a majestic tree by George Grosz. He drew after it after coming to Long Island, NY, after fleeing Germany during the Nazi era. If nothing else, it must have represented his effort to find hope in a lost world. If George, that wicked satirist, could give himself a break and contemplate the beauty of a tree for an instant, I could, too. Of course, the shadow in that moment was ever present. I knew that the lake outside my window was dead from acid rain. I heard and saw military jets, painted a frightening matte black, strafe our lake; their deafening roars as intimidating as any weapon. A Strategic Air Command base was a dozen miles away. In that fall of 1983, the abundance of colours in those hills, helped me compartmentalise those pains, and I drew trees.

While this creative endeavor was comforting, I was ambivalent about how easily I was diverted and gave myself grief for avoiding the real problems in the world. I did not yet understand that my drawing was a form of practicing gratitude, an essential part of the work that sustains many eco-artists. In my ignorance, I hastily returned my focus to the nasty shit under the surface of dominant culture. Reaching deep into my frustrations and fear was more compelling.

LESSON FOUR:

Sometimes there will be some unkind, interior voices telling you to make art in certain ways. It is recommended that you tell those voices to go and sit on a blanket in a corner of the room. You can give them symbolic cookies and milk, and then tell them to behave and leave you alone. Trust that your muses have many different ways for framing the world.

Flyer drifts into a rhythm of breath and calls on her ancestors to embrace her. She hears their voices, singing stories she has heard since she was inside her mother. The tunes and lyrics were often so sad that the elders would cry while singing. She grabs onto another memory, one of dancing her resilience. She feels her strong feet caress the pressed earth floor. She smiles, imagining her ancestors' bodies as the soft dirt beneath her feet.

Early on the voice in my work seemed a bit detached and cynical. Partly this was the influence of living in NYC, where sprinkling the planetary problems with dark humour seemed a better strategy to reach an audience. But there was something else at work. My encounter with an author at Blue Mountain Center made me curious to explore that 'something else'. Joanna Macy's book, *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age* fell on my head while browsing in the small library there. I inhaled it and wrote to Joanna immediately. She and her cohorts were working with activists who were cutting themselves off from a wellspring of energy by not acknowledging their fear and grief. She helped them awaken to their despair, rather than squishing it down, meditate with it, connect to each other by sharing that collective pain and converting it into action.

A few months later, I was in a workshop with two of Joanna's students and understood how to take "THIS IS NOT A TEST" to a different level. I was already able to tap into things that many were feeling but were either too ashamed or numb to discuss with others. After seeing my work, some audience members felt compelled to leave hidden notes, addressed to me, in the installation. They said, 'YOU get me; you understand my fears. Why isn't anyone else talking about this?' Now, with the guidance of these new teachers, I made my work explicitly audience participatory, and created a workshop to read the nightmares and dreams that people contributed to the audio installation.

Despite the unexpected recognition that my work was receiving at that time, I made the choice to leave NYC and began my career as a socially engaged, teaching artist. I had been 'teaching art as a subversive activity' in museums, but that work was not sufficient to pay the bills. So when a full-time, academic, visiting artist gig was offered, I grabbed it. I was lucky to have this choice. The forces of gentrification were pushing many of my activist artist peers out of the city to fewer economic opportunities and more isolation.

Today the cultural ecosystems of cities continue to be raped by the marketplace. The bulldozer of development under the neoliberal oligarchy of late capitalism does exceptionally effective dirty work, destroying neighbourhoods, vitality and lives, and in their absence the residents find expensive simulacra, things that appear tasty, but are empty of spirit.

LESSON FIVE:

Be resilient and adaptable. Find allies and resist the forces that are causing a diaspora of cultural workers, among others.

Flyer emerges from her reverie singing and swaying her hips. Those working nearby now see and hear her and call out: “tell us what happened...tell us.” She pauses, sighs and then begins, as the community of adults and children of different ages, colours and genders circle around, “I wandered further than usual to harvest roots. I lost the path, I heard strange, piercing sounds in the distance, half human cries. They were not like those of any animal we know. I crawled into nearby bushes to hide. I struggled through thick brambles, my hair and clothing catching and I felt the soil loose under my feet. The ground seemed to open up and I fell into a deep hole. I spent the night there shivering.”

When my immune system began to collapse, after moving to LA, the stakes for doing my work increased exponentially. The combination of smog and the aerial spraying of pesticides in LA carried my body to the land of ‘overload’ and disability. On the days when I was well enough, I made art about it. Again I had no choice. I was enraged and overwhelmed. I walked slowly, from clinic, to healer, to meditation, to another clinic. Previously a hiker, a dancer, a biker and a swimmer – now all of those identities were gone, like a popped balloon. Too sick to make it to my own opening, colleagues used a diagram to hang my installation *Out of Breath* featuring a large accordion book hanging like a layer of smog from the ceiling. Underneath it sat an oversized tissue box where viewers could place their own stories about smog-induced illness.



Fig. 1
Out of Breath, 1994. Tissue box, detail from installation, mixed media.

Increasing abuses from the administration at my tenured job only aggravated my condition, so eventually we stepped off what felt like a conveyor belt to an early death, and moved to a rural village in the hills of western Massachusetts. In my arms was our newborn son. I was determined to get well, for his sake alone.

LESSON SIX:

Take leaps of faith. Believe in your ability to heal and the ecosystem’s ability to heal.

Flyer continues to speak slowly and says, “in the hole next to me, there was something cold and hard, not rock, but more like metal. It was too dark to see, and I was too frightened by the howling to even think. I held the amulet around my neck and chanted for calm in my head. After a little while, it felt like something in the pit was speaking to me, like a kind grandmother. I was able to gather my courage, and as the sun rose, I crawled out slowly, using the metal thing as a step and the search party soon found me.”

Soon after our move, I found some ads for pesticides in a box of old *Time* magazines. One, from 1945, boldly stated ‘DDT IS GOOD FOR ME’ and was illustrated with a chorus line of dancing vegetables, animals and a happy housewife. Research indicated that these chemicals were originally designed for bio-warfare during WWII. At the end of the war, they were repackaged and marketed for domestic use. I scanned the ads into Photoshop and played with the names of the companies (Monsanto became Monstrous, Union Carbide became Union Ecocide). I inserted into each of the ads the stories of sick people who I had met in clinics – ‘the canaries in the coal mine’. I was ‘culture jamming’ – a fine technique for making the opaque more transparent. I digitally painted portraits of the ‘canaries’ from memory and numbered them. I wanted those who were still well to understand that this marginal group is substantial in number. I told my own story, one canary’s song. I did all of this to heal, because I had to. Damaged by my brush with modernity, this pressure to use supposedly ‘cutting edge’ technologies without testing them sufficiently first goes on to this day, full tilt (think GMOs). The ‘precautionary principle’ is ignored when profit is the motivating force.

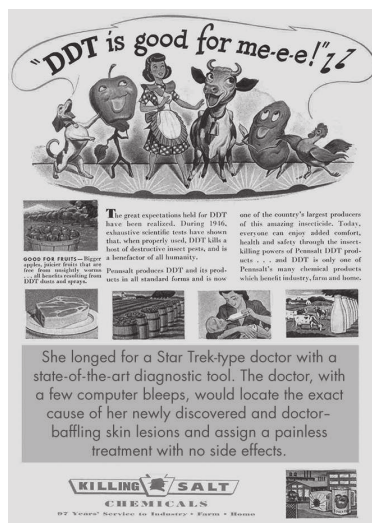


Fig. 2
DDT is Good for Me, from the project *CANARY NOTES: The Personal Politics of Environmental Illness*, 1998. Artist's book and performance.

As I began to heal, I began to perform the project, *CANARY NOTES: The Politics of Environmental Illness*. Projected digital images that included the stories and portraits of people whose immune systems had broken down. I spoke about the predatory nature of these companies. I was asked to speak at activist conferences, art venues and universities, and hoped that experiencing this work might awaken more people before the epidemic of environmental illness becomes more commonplace. Ironically I now own the patent for ‘DDT is Good for Me’. Chemistry textbook authors must contact me for permission when they wish to publish it. The fee they send me is then donated to the Pesticide Action Network.

LESSON SEVEN:

Be generous and share your abundance. Your alliances should include activist and community groups.

After Flyer finishes speaking, the elders sit in circle, drumming. Many questions float in the air, and decisions need to be made. What is this new threat? Did Flyer encounter something worth exploring? The whole band is agitated now. The impatience is palpable. Yala grabs some cedar baskets and encourages everyone to make their hands busy. There's always stuff to repair, garments to patch and pouches to braid.

In the midst of this project's development, my then four year-old son was watching me paint on the computer screen. After a short while, he said, ‘mom, why are you painting another sick person?’ I paused and looking down at my son, I realised that he had seen what I could not. I was obsessed with the problem rather than its cure, so I asked myself, ‘how do I make images of healing?’ And then I just began.

For the first time, consciously, I brought breathing meditation into the room while drawing and painting. I had practiced yoga off-and-on since my teen years, sat with amazing teachers of socially engaged Buddhism, been part of nourishing sanghas (meditation groups that are like extended families), seen healers who worked with energies of all kinds, but the intellectual part of my practice balked at taking this piece of me into the studio. I could talk about pains of the world and neuroses of the individual, but not about the spiritual. Was it because of my agnostic family of origin, or had I received messages that working from the spiritual was not cool or hip, not feminist enough, not activist enough? Was I going to fall off the edge into the abyss of new age blather and lose my ability to think critically? Was my spiritual life so intimate that shedding this seemingly necessary boundary would

threaten its existence or turn it (horrors) into another commodity? I threw all of this self-doubt into a corner, and started drawing, tentatively at first, but soon my studio and computer screen began to fill with colourful bodhisattvas, buddhas, yoginis and pagan gods and goddesses. The very cynical and hard part of me was making fun of this process, but it seemed to have a healing effect, this combination of nutrition, herbs, homeopathy, love, breath and art.

LESSON EIGHT:

Not everyone with an environmental illness gets well, especially if you are poor and living in a place with contaminated air, soil and water, with no access to healing resources. If you have the privilege of good health or manage to recover from your illness, use some of your new energy to make activist art to awaken others to this epidemic.

Flyer is repairing a quilt with her sister when the drumming stops suddenly. An elder shakes a brightly coloured rattle and sighs deeply, “we will go back to those bushes and keep our eyes open. We understand that it is again time to learn from things underground. We will need to be cautious, but we won’t be ruled by fear.”

Before fleeing the smog in LA, my life partner, Bob Spivey, exposed me to utopic thinking in a profound way. A few months before meeting me, he had attended the summer program at the Institute for Social Ecology. The visionary projects and ideas shared there had profoundly lifted his spirit. It was hard to imagine that he had been in despair about the state of the world. When we were invited to come back to ISE, with me in the role of guest artist, I was eager to tap into this utopic energy. Eventually we began to facilitate a course together, *Activist Art in Community*, for almost a decade. We helped students make art about the challenges in their lives and communities. We discussed the spectrum of activist art practices; from posters, puppets, placards and artful actions that can make a movement or protest compelling to the interactive, socially engaged projects that provoke story telling and foster dialogue with folks who might not be on their side. I shared tactics for intervening in public spaces, camouflaging the art as something that doesn’t look like art, but brings in an unsuspecting audience who connect through the questions being addressed; and how some emerge changed, even a little.

The theories and practice of social ecology helped me connect many dots; in particular, how injustices have systemic roots, beyond a few bad guys. I learned

about the structures that enforce oppression and what’s required to undo them. Most importantly, I found strategies for imagining a different future, and saw examples of the alternative systems, technologies and mindsets that will create the world I want to live in.

Directly inspired by my time at ISE was an artist’s book about healing body image (I learned that women’s body hate was a direct result of ecocide and patriarchy). My deeper understanding of the forces of oppression also inspired my counter-quincentennial project about assimilation and genocide and subsequent pieces about racism, anti-Semitism and fear of difference. Because of social ecology, my understanding of systems influencing my life and those around me became more coherent and linked easily with teachings from socially engaged Buddhism (from my work with Joanna Macy and Thich Nhat Hanh).

During one of our last summers at ISE, one of the students introduced me to the term ‘eco-art’ – a label that was newly coined. I was suspicious of the term at first. My doubts were partly rooted in my rejection of the way the high art world would take inspiring, nascent aspects of the socially engaged culture and neuter them by packaging them up and labelling them. I was hopeful that this new movement created work that questioned the status quo, looked at the interconnections between race, class, gender and ecocide, and would posit solutions to these concerns. I had a tall order.

LESSON NINE:

Don’t be quick to judge and don’t settle for an agenda that is not yours. There’s a spectrum of work that needs to emerge right now. We don’t know which ones will make a difference.

Flyers’ people move with the seasons. They’ve found and created caves in the hills for the rainy season and when the heat is too much, they head down to the coast. They’ve become great gatherers, given the lack of much to hunt or fish. They get most of their protein from plants, seeds and an occasional egg. The elders have spoken of times with lots of sickness and places where illness seems to dwell. Flyer still finds it hard to believe that there were ancestors who did not think about their children, who poisoned the fragile nest that is her inherited home. She often hums a chant for all the ancestors who managed to survive, allowing her to be there.

When I started my research, I found eco-art that was designed to help various species thrive, to help people reconnect with nature and the cycles of life, to demonstrate how to create more sustainable energy, clean water, fertile soil and breathable air and to remediate damaged places. All of this was great, but I was curious how many of the folks advocating this movement saw art that was anti-capitalist as eco-art, or work about the media, gender issues, economics and racism as part of the world of eco-art. In other words, were we just talking environmentalism here or were we talking about real systemic transformation?

I was eager to meet some of these cohorts, and after serving on a panel with several, an online discussion group was born (the Eco Art Network) where we discussed our work, definitions of eco-art, ways to make our work more visible and understood, how to deal with burnt-out, perceived failures and how to collaborate better. We inspired each other, had some conflicts and shared resources generously. As the group grew from a dozen to over a hundred international members, the conversations began to address some of the concerns mentioned above.

LESSON TEN:

Remember that it is important to see the intersectionality of issues. One cannot solve the environmental crisis without looking at the other forms of oppression reinforced by our economic system.

For several generations, the community has been living simply, scavenging, creating ritual and expanding their ways of thinking about family, gender and sexuality (each child has many parents and, in particular, due to low fertility, multi-fathered). Learning how to solve conflicts and to share abundance has been an ongoing practice; some good skills were inherited from the earlier times and it's best to say that they are still being learned. Refugees wander into camp in cycles, and are invited to stay. Ancestors who studied permaculture design are blessed frequently, since the water saving, seed harvesting, soil building and structure creating systems are essential to survival. Everyone learns a healing modality or two, depending on their affinities. The legacy of earlier times has meant many miscarriages and sicknesses. Encounters with toxic landscapes are not as frequent now, but that wasn't so easy after the Shift.

We moved to Vashon Island, a place that at first glance looked and felt idyllic in many ways. Full of organic farms, this progressive community was welcoming in many ways, but soon I learned that a smelter's plume from Tacoma had contaminated the

island, and, as a result, the soil was rich in heavy metals like Cadmium, Lead, Arsenic and Mercury – not such a good thing for human health. There were also other problems, some just haunting, like the nuclear missiles that once lived above us at the former NIKE site. Soon I learned about the vast quantities of nuclear weapons, a few miles away across the Salish Sea at the naval base in Bangor, WA, the third largest cache in the world. I began to contemplate ground zero with fresh eyes – the glorious beauty of this island, with its cathedrals of Douglas firs, and the instantaneous mass death and various versions of slow deaths sitting in the neighbourhood.

I began doing 'contact improvisation' with scavenged materials, letting shapes, weight, balance, texture, colour and random chance determine the forms that would speak to my gut emotions. I moved between the garden, the woods and my tiny studio space. I made tiny figurines out of clay, sometimes screaming and sometimes meditating and smiling, and sewed them into the landscape of each piece. This dance yielded a new series called, *underGROUND: Artifacts of the Present Moment*. *Everything* began to feel like archaeology. Like we had already become a line of dust the width of cigarette paper, circling the planet.



Fig. 3
A Prayer for Islands Underwater, from the series *underGROUND* (2009). Mixed media.

LESSON ELEVEN:

Listen to inner rhythms and respond to the changing landscapes around you. It is all compost.

A day after Flyer's overnight disappearance, a dusty and sweaty work party carries a scratched and bent metal chest into the centre of the talking circle. There's lots of excited chatter about what might be inside, and some anticipation that it will add to the community's inventory of tools. Volunteers arrive with some of the latter, precious ones that have been handed down, including a pry bar and a screwdriver, to crack the lid open. Flyer welcomes everyone into the circle with her reed flute. People leave offerings of seeds and trinkets at an altar made from brightly coloured and unusable scrap plastic. While everyday is sacred to this band of survivors, unearthing artifacts is an especially sacred act.

I realised that I was deeply grieving, despite the organising and the visibility of activism all around me. And I began to feel a bone-deep need to create altars for people to mourn together. Altars were not new to my creative process, since I had created spaces for audience members to leave their stories in many of my installations over the years, but my impulse was shifting. An old refrain was coming back very strongly: how to we express grief together, and would that release of feeling encourage more activism?

These impulses conjured up a strange form. I wrapped and twisted strands of mostly defunct Xmas lights (found at the local thrift store) onto rusty, bent tomato plant hoops, and transported this strange object to the local community gallery and wrote in charcoal on the wall:

Altering the Useless into an Altar

*Now that I am no longer useful, I could be cast off
to become part of the tangled, plastic gyre, the size of Texas,
swirling in the frigid Pacific.*

*And my fragments might be found in the inflamed belly
of an albatross on the Midway Atoll
or dangle perilously around the throat of a sea turtle.*

*Instead I sit in this gallery, asking you, the viewer, to give me a reason
not to end up at the dump,
like billions of other holiday decorations,
mostly bought with the innocent desire for beauty, light and meaningful ritual.*

*If our love for light could be rerouted into sharing stories
that light up and warm our hearts,
if the plastic and wire could be rewoven into useful, beautiful things,
then, and only then
will I become part of the purpose that must be gathered now.
For things are not the same as they have always been.*

*Objects have stories to tell us,
if we would only listen and truly hear them.
We have meanings to make with each other,
meanings that will take us into a reframed world,
a world where plastic is gathered into altars,
along with the toxic materials of this past century.*

*Please light up this room or the heart of another,
with a story, or some evidence of your presence.*

LESSON TWELVE:

Don't be satisfied with making art in galleries, although it might be a good laboratory for an idea. Find new audiences and venues in your community.

Like a jar under pressure with fermentation, the metal chest appears to explode with plastic bubbles. Someone shouts “watch out, be careful” and others laugh nervously. Flyer and Conduit approach the chest, lifting and unwrapping whatever is hidden inside. There's a hush in the group, as they carefully pull out large pod-like forms, inscribed with symbols.

Several events conflated to help me make more of my art outdoors. First off, the university in its efforts to ‘economise’ had evicted me from my campus studio space for the second time. Then my partner’s organisation, SEEDS (aka Social Ecology Education and Demonstration School), had taken on a soil remediation project, using mushrooms and plants to clean up a piece of very damaged land. The people leasing the land at The Beall Greenhouses had dreams of making the property a showcase for ecological projects, including eco-art. Decades of petroleum products and pesticide use had turned the area into a brown-field. I was invited to develop the eco-art project and applied for grant money.

In order to train for the project, I attended a friend’s permaculture design course. I had known about permaculture for many years, but this was my first training with divers experts. While brainstorming the project, I took some inspiration from fellow eco-artists doing restoration work. I wanted to make the possibilities of remediation visible in a project that community stakeholders would eventually support. *Eden Reframed* was born. For the first time, I would be able to be able to work with a team to re-vision the world, rather than critique it.



Fig. 4

Eden Reframed: A Community and Ecological Art Project, built in 2011 and still open to the public 24/7. Burton Adventure and Recreation Center, Vashon Island, WA.

The same week that the grant came through, I learned that the folks who had invited the project had to move on. Despite our best efforts to convince the landowners about the value of remediating a patch of their land in an artful way, they were unwilling to host it. They did not want the attention. Eventually we were invited by the island’s parks program to develop our project on a reclaimed school site.

During the winter, we did some community outreach, by displaying a design for the proposed project in a public exhibition, *Reframing Eden*. Aside from a large drawing of the proposed garden, the audience was surrounded by a series of photo collages that depicted mushrooms and sprouting plants as superheroes, healing damaged landscapes. Each myco and phyto-remediator appeared to arrive in the nick of time to transform a despoiled beach, a smoggy horizon or a tailings pond. In the centre of the space, live squash seedlings broke through photographic membranes of smokestacks and dumps adhered to small planters. And in the far end of the space, two rocking chairs sat waiting for farmers and gardeners to come into the gallery to record their stories. They were each asked why they were motivated

to plant seeds in this time, a time of ecological crisis. The jewels of what they shared were later transcribed onto small, thin pieces of cedar.

These ‘cards’ of cedar were dipped in beeswax to become part of a *Story Hive* that lives in the center of *Eden Reframed*. Visitors can read the archive of stories and add their own. The hive was built from cedar that had fallen on the island. It has multiple drawers, cubbies and slots housing the stories. Over time, the hive has become a seed exchange and a place where visitors leave treasures of all kinds.

Over the course of several months, a team of locals developed the 50’ diameter space, with permaculture and soil remediation consultants. Volunteers dug brush drains for dry season irrigation of the beds, lined them with clay. Free materials were collected from folks all over the island. A local distributor donated organic compost and topsoil. I gave talks at the local schools, brought in students, members of different community groups and more, and found enthusiastic supporters.

The garden itself is divided into two arcs, with gates connecting the arcs at both ends. In one arc is a food forest, providing visitors with free snacks in season. It features many types of berries, from raspberry, two types of strawberries, aronia berry, blueberries, salal and huckleberry, as well as many fruit trees, medicinal and culinary herbs. The food forest offers an education about the benefits of low maintenance gardening promoted by permaculture design. Teenagers using the skate park adjacent to *Eden Reframed* said they were grateful for the healthy breakfast, as they chewed on fresh broccoli and raspberries. We had created an alternative to a snack vending machine.



Fig. 5
Eden Reframed, detail of Story Hive (2011). Vashon Island, WA.

The second arc was planted with phyto-remediators like sunflowers, violas, borage and calendula, along with spores from myco-remediators like shaggy mane and oyster mushrooms. Our soil remediating grad student from Evergreen State College, Shannon Clay, who had trained with Mr. Fungi himself, Paul Stamets, tested our soil early on and discovered that there were oddly no heavy metals in the soil. It was landfill that had not been contaminated by the Asarco smelter. But we decided to proceed with the demonstration so that visitors would learn about the process.

Ironically, I moved off the island and into Seattle the day after the garden opened to the public in September 2011, but I maintained a committed relationship to the project for three years. I travelled back to the island to weed, water, harvest and facilitated seasonal events for the solstices and equinoxes. At one celebration, a friend who had been coming to these gatherings regularly said, ‘*this garden is like an omphalos.*’ I asked him what that meant. He said, ‘*a navel.*’ We laughed and agreed, ‘*it’s a belly button to the mother, and we need lots more these liberated public spaces, omphalos in all different shapes and sizes, all over the planet.*’

As of September 2014 *Eden Reframed* is being cared for by a handful of local gardeners and community activists; stakeholders who are busy trying to ban Neonicotinoids from the island, planting ‘pollinator-friendly’ gardens. They deeply appreciate this liberated public space.

LESSON THIRTEEN:

Remember that working in collaboration with others is one of the best ways to create community. Develop a permeable ego and forget about the art world.

Flyer slides her hands along the carved surfaces, hoping that the sensations will provide her with clues. Intuition is highly valued in her band, and training to heighten those skills is encouraged. Some of her more scientifically minded cohort has asked to inspect and analyse the evidence. They notice a seam like that of a seed, along the edge of each pod, and begin to debate the origins of each one and the best way to open them. The elders ask for a moment of silence to contemplate next steps, and in that silence, a child of about 9, whispers, “what about the howling that Flyer heard? No one has talked about it. Maybe opening the box will bring something scary.”

In Summer 2014 I knew that I wanted to make a series of altars about extinction. I had been hearing more and more people talk about humans going extinct and all the attendant miseries that will accompany that fate. They would speak about this possibility in a very cavalier way. I realised that this was another variation on the theme that I had carried internally for so many years. My heart was breaking to hear their despair and their senses of powerlessness. I needed to find a way to process what I understood was happening to the world and its species, and offer others different tools to feel engaged in positive visions.

I wanted to make a series that would roll-up and be easy to carry from place to place. I looked around my studio and felt an impulse to work with used curtains and burlap, old x-rays, branches, thread, tracing paper and matte medium. I was clueless about how they were going to merge into something compelling to look at. So I started with something skeletal. I sewed each piece of cloth onto a branch. I punched holes into the edges of the x-rays and then proceeded to sew them into a central space in each curtain. I was thinking about Tibetan Thangkas as devotional images, but decided not to be literal, and didn’t really mimic the form. This was a journey into something I could not yet visualise, but I understood that it was going to talk about things that are hidden.

I recognised that I did not want to create dystopic images. For years I have understood that voicing my despair in that way may be therapeutic for me, but it rarely activates others in powerful ways. So I encouraged myself to make something visually compelling that speaks about this precious moment, a beauty that expresses my gratitude for the sweet, imperfect contradictions in this life. In other words, when I began to open to the suffering, the grief of losing so much, somehow I found that beauty emerged.

I started listening to Joanna Macy’s talks while I worked. In her recent talks and writings she discusses the ‘Great Turning’ and what might be necessary to shift our world into one that is concerned about future generations. She talks about the legacy we are leaving the future beings. Her words resonated deeply. I began to meditate on those generations to come, the ones that will be contending with a radioactive planet with fewer species and less access to clean water, clean air, topsoil, healthy food, shelter or any sort of wellbeing. As I was stitching, I allowed images to dance, like hidden energy behind each curtain; images of people connecting through their pain to morph into vast networks of people educating each other, finding new tools for creating a just and healed planet, bubbling and juicy with diversity, fertility and possibility. I imagined people all over the planet turning their shared grief and gratitude into a resonant and luscious chorus that cannot be silenced until the shift occurs.

The twelve hanging altars were birthed almost simultaneously, in the sense that I worked on them all at the same time. The first to appear complete was in honour of honeybees, and then monarch butterflies arrived. Over the course of three months, altars to honour old growth trees, clean water, indigenous cultures, clean air, creatures of the land, the winged ones, clean energy, creatures of the sea, fertile soil and human beings emerged. Although there is so much more to mourn and experience with gratitude, I felt complete with this chapter.

When the altars are on display, whether in a gallery or on the street, the audience has an opportunity to share stories of their own grief and gratitude on a piece of tracing paper. A basket of small stones sits nearby. Contributors leave their ‘trace’ under a stone at the foot of each wall hanging/altar. Visitors can read the contributions of others, each person bending down and moving stones as they do this. As writer and activist Alice Walker says, *‘For we can do nothing substantial toward changing our course on the planet, a destructive one, without rousing ourselves, individual by individual, and bringing our small, imperfect stones to the pile.’*

LESSON FOURTEEN:

Have faith that this is the work you are meant to do, but don't be messianic. Be humble. Listen well. Carry on.

Flyer nods at the young one, pushes firmly on the seam of one pod, and out tumbles an accordion-folded cascade of images and words. Gasping is the only sound heard in the circle of 25 people. Faces of animals, many of them not seen for over a hundred years, dot the pages of the manuscript, and embedded in the paper are bumpy forms, like seeds. "Yes, they are seeds", Flyer exclaims, "and maybe what I heard, that half human cry, is one of these animals, coming back from extinction."

These excerpts of Flyer's story are part of my brainstorming process for the collaborative project: *We Almost Didn't Make It: An Illuminated and Participatory Manuscript from the Future*. Our collective, ARTifACTs, includes two other activist artists, Ed Mast, a playwright, and Carol Rashawna Williams, a mixed media artist. We are envisioning a passion play performed by descendants of various versions of the future, a travelling caravan, a graphic narrative enclosed by pod-like artifacts and an interactive workshop that invites participants to imagine their descendants. Flyer's story, one that describes a somewhat idyllic variation of a neo-primitivist, post-apocalyptic vision is but one of many possible futures. Others will feature less predictable weather, more friction between humans, lingering violence and unexpected miracles created by technology, spiritual awakening and resistance movements. In each future, we are exploring the evidence, the artifacts that are found, and how they explain what actions were taken or not taken to allow future generations to exist, in whatever way they manifest. We want to explore what were those imperfect bridges that moved us from one trajectory to another.

So my question for our nascent eco-artists, passionate and creative souls who may be juggling soul-sucking jobs, struggling with debt and exhausted, is... how are you imagining yourselves as ancestors for the next generations we anticipate? We hope that you've turned your head and heart away from the vicissitudes of the mainstream art world where you will find too much focus on ego-stroking in a decadent marketplace and not enough attention given to the reality of our ecosystem's shifting pulses. Perhaps survival issues have made art making out of reach entirely, but please don't lose hope. We need you, whatever you can muster.

LESSON FIFTEEN:

Form a collective or a support group that shares whatever privileges it has. Create spontaneous eco-art interventions and artful seed bombs. Fertilise grass roots movements with your composted stories. Learn as much as you can about the interconnections between issues. Imagine the world you want to live in and take some small steps or uninhibited leaps to get there. Keep your heart and eyes open.