

Mutual Adaptation

— *Lumi Tan*

In the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in New York City, during which my ability to understand what art institutions should be doing alternated rapidly between frantic optimism and deep apathy, I read “Smells Like Burning” by Isabel Parkes in *Flash Art*, which cannily comments on the growing embrace of the concept of ecosystems within art institutions. Parkes used two primary examples in her article. First, the Serpentine Gallery in London, which distinguished itself as the only arts institution to have a curator, Luisa Pietroiusti, devoted to ecology, and had recently proclaimed a new mission which centers ecological responsibility. This would be a challenge for any institution showing temporary exhibitions of international artists, but perhaps particularly for one whose artistic director, Hans Ulrich Obrist, set the precedent for the curator-as-ambassador for globalization, never staying in one place long enough for the jet lag to settle in. The second example was that of Performance Space New York, whose Executive Artistic Director Jenny Schlenzka announced that, during 2020, a group of artists would have complete control over the programming and budget for the institution, with choreographer Sarah Michelson—who has had a long and involved history of performance there—taking on the role of ecologist, rather than as director or leader of the group of primarily younger artists. These two institutions are using “ecology” in different ways to distinguish themselves from the historically extractive relationships between artists and institutions; Michelson is not meant to reduce the carbon footprint of Performance Space New York (PSNY), but divert dominant ways of working. In the many metaphors between natural ecological systems and those in the art world, one line by Parkes continues to stir some conflicting feelings within me almost two years later:

“Reintroducing Performance Space New York or the Serpentine Gallery as ecosystems in which the most fundamental *and endangered organism is the artist* has allowed Obrist, Pietroiusti, and Schlenzka to differentiate their institutions to board members, artists, and audiences alike in a crowded cultural landscape.” [Emphasis my own]¹

Undoubtedly, at the time of publication this article couldn't have fully predicted the severe and long-lasting impacts of the pandemic on the arts, particularly performing artists relying on live audiences and touring gigs. And artists working in all disciplines felt the burden of having their shows canceled by the same institutions who were now asking them to share some videos online, make a lockdown playlist, or do an online studio visit for invisible audiences for free or meager honorariums. (As an institutional curator, I am guilty of these requests as well.) But now that we are years and multiple variants into the pandemic, and as we've delved into reopenings with unpredictable caveats requiring constant improvisation, I'm sitting with the word “endangered” in this moment of extended uncertainty. We (and now I use “we” as the people embedded in institutions, or those who are tasked with presenting works to a public) still depend on artists for everything—to give us content, to make us relevant, to animate us, to make connections between ideas we can't fully present as our own because we are afraid of potential repercussions from donors or online critics—as we've shown time and time again that we can't effectively deal with even the vaguest threat of conflict. Parkes recognizes this as well, writing “The risks of using ecology as a metaphor include that it perpetuates these institutions' ability to profit from more free or freelance creative labor, burdening artists with the task of not only making art, but producing and packaging it to the highest ethical standard.”² There is a thin line between empowering artists within the institution and exploiting them when we ask them to act as curators, administrators, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access consultants, or healers, without taking on institutional accountability within ourselves or resolving basic questions such as putting artists on payroll and giving them health insurance. As Pietroiusti says in an *Artnet* interview about her role, “Unfortunately, a tree is never going to be a curator, and so we need to address the ‘ecological’ somewhere else in the infrastructure, in terms of, say, greening institutions themselves.”³

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All of this has shown that artists are fundamental, absolutely. But artists are only endangered in relation to the institution. And institutions are only one part of the ecosystem. Art institutions aren't natural. They take a tremendous amount of resources to sustain, they can die off without the proper support, and they're resistant to change. 2020 is a year that sounds like the future, but it was one where we all got stuck in the present, unable to move at our prior speed or to respond to calls to truly “slow down.” The ecological system was no longer a metaphor as vital participants vanished overnight, and the mechanics of the cultural landscape went quiet. Only the political climate seemed to move swiftly past us all, goading us to keep up. Some of us made valiant efforts to make changes for the future, while others kept their heads down and hoped the moment would pass. Around me, there were calls to break down the barriers between administrators, directors, funders, collectors, artists, and the environment itself. Over time, I've seen multiple projects that engaged soil and dirt continue to spring up, hoping to find ways to create

unpredictable growth and mess within typically sterile galleries. Let's compost it all.⁴ What are the models that allow us to breathe better, to regenerate, and to nourish each other? When I think of the most endangered artists, I think first of the artists who garner the most mainstream press, who are on the rosters of blue chip galleries, or artists who have dozens of studio assistants as the most protected by the market. These artists are consistently presented as consolidating power in the art world, yet in that ecosystem, predatory collectors are able to swallow artist's careers whole, controlling them at auction without the artists themselves participating in the profit. In another ecosystem, one that's more symbiotic, perhaps the artists who can create their own conditions for showing, and who understand the power and potency of remaining outside of the center will never make it on the endangered list.

Years into the pandemic, I'm attempting to learn about Oregon through a screen, inserting myself virtually into the living rooms and studios of artists instead of seeing and touching things, understanding scale, and missing the intimacies of local hospitality. Despite the hours that we've all spent doing this since March 2020, no one has become accustomed to the limita-

tions of this format. Yet, as difficult as it is to see outside the frame of Zoom boxes, I'm aware that studios, galleries, and theaters are also restrictive frames that prove difficult to see beyond. When artists say

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they are in the woods, moved to the woods, rooted in the water and terrain of Oregon for generations, I can't imagine what that smells or feels like.

Despite how much I can read about the severe heatwaves of last summer, or see images depicting devastating wildfires, they remain outside of my sensorial library from my roots in the East Coast and particularly my home in New York City. Ecology is not a term that has to be superimposed on these studio visits; it is ever present even if not named. When one artist speaks of secret locations in their local landscapes, ones which are referenced in their work but not revealed, I think of how artists are asked to expose everything about themselves and their practices, while curators are generally asked to share absolutely nothing about their identities in relationship to their work. Which parts of the ecosystem do we keep for ourselves for protection, sustainability, survival? And what are the economies that can support this? What I can see within this artistic ecology is a mode of generative negotiation—one that often follows refusal—within a structure that wants to be flexible. I can see how the spaces and institutions that the artists are choosing to engage with are consistently being challenged to keep up with practices that are not up for compromise.

I can see this reflected in the intention of the Oregon Visual Arts Ecology Project, and the lack of desire to define or silo the presentation of information. Like the myth of individual responsibilities toward climate change, our individual responsibilities in the art world can only go so far without each other. Collaboration and mutual opportunities for learning were at the core of these visits, but never couched within the easy narrative that this shift was caused by isolationist demands of the pandemic. These modes of collectivity came out of a greater desire for the ecosystem to develop together, without predictable outcomes but an acceptance

of risk or opacity. Perhaps this is why “ecosystem” is now preferred over “community,” which needs to define itself through commonality and thus exclusion.

The must-read status in the art world (at least from my perspective) achieved by anthropologist Anna L. Tsing’s 2015 book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, which looks at the economies of the matsutake mushroom—including the foraging culture by Southeast Asian immigrants in the Cascade Mountains of Oregon—demonstrates our desire for other systems to take root (or perhaps take over completely). In a recent interview in *Art Review*, Tsing proposes another form of relation:

“It is so important to work across different forms of knowledge-formation and allow them to interact without trying to create what [sociologist] John Law calls a ‘one-world world’, a homogeneous space in which everything fits perfectly together....I like the term ‘assemblage’ as it’s used in ecology. In that context it describes all the plants, soils, and other things that just happen to be in a particular place. It doesn’t assume in advance to know the relationships between them, and so it forces you to figure them out rather than simply apply a predetermined logic. Are these two plants in some form of mutualist relationship, or is one a parasite on the other? We don’t know, and we shouldn’t presume to know what the effects of their rubbing up against each other might be.”⁵

There is no intimate knowledge when a curator drops into a city far from their own and does a series of studio visits with artists they meet for the first time. I am fortunate to have done this in cities all over the world, and am grateful for every moment that marks difference, unknowing, and the impossibility of understanding. Studio visits are transactional by design, and perhaps curators who drop in are really just parasites on artists. (I think we’ve all felt that at least once.) But what cannot be shared or said during these interactions, what can only be revealed in other modalities of communication and open-ended timelines is invaluable. In this embrace, the line between the ecosystem, which allows us to live and breathe, can be fully integrated into the one which fuels our making; one which doesn’t differentiate our institutions but demonstrates their potential for meaningful adaptation.

1 Parkes, Isabel. “Smells Like Burning” *Flash Art*, April 22, 2020. <https://www.flash---art.com/2020/04/smells-like-burning/>

2 *ibid*

3 Brown, Kate. “‘We Have More Agency Than We Realize’: Serpentine Curator Lucia Pietroiusti on How the Art World Can Tackle Climate Change” *Artnet.com*, July 16, 2019. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/lucia-pietroiusti-serpentine-climate-change-1593163>

4 I owe this love of compost to performance artist Alex Tatarsky, who was in residency at The Kitchen in November 2021.

5 Eastham, Ben. “Anna L. Tsing on Creating ‘Wonder in the Midst of Dread.’” *ArtReview.com*, November 29, 2021. <https://www.artreview.com/anna-l-ting-on-creating-wonder-in-the-midst-of-dread/>

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