



TOWARDS THE CORE

working (worming) underneath
landscape architecture

Larissa Belcic, writing for Nocturnal Medicine

Fig. 01 - Source material by Nocturnal Medicine, image altered by LUNCH editors.

The techniques of landscape architecture as we were instructed in them include distance as a starting condition. During our education, not once did someone ask us—how does land live in you, and you in it? Our identities and ancestral legacies were subsumed into a milky monogamous slush poured into the molds of our tools; the instruments we were instructed to wield in order to, ever so surgically, operate on the environmental-cultural body.

Within the idea of distance is interwoven the notion of Separate. I am over here, and you are over there. Mind separate from body, human separate from nature, woman separate from man, etc. But ideas of distance are now an absurd pantomime, and those who cling to them increasingly play the fool as insect populations face extinction, wildfires rage on, extreme storms grow more rampant, and crude oil spills out across the ocean. As designers reckoning with these realities, we look at the tools that we were given, and find them, on their own, pretty inadequate to the task. Technologically, the tools

of the trade advance consistently, but their ontological evolution is much slower, and the technological advancements tend to reproduce stances of distance that have been foundational for so long in Western perspectives.

And so in our practice, Nocturnal Medicine, we've been asking ourselves—How can we crawl underneath, into a new way of working? How can we get sticky with it, dirty with it? And by “asking,” we mean more like—we've just been trying to do it: to get underneath, to get inside, to swallow, to intertwine.

Timothy Morton has a great phrase to describe this—the “zero landscape.”¹ That there is no more first, or second, or third person perspective in relation to “landscape” (me and landscape, you and landscape, them and landscape), but a total collapse wherein us-and-landscape are just all mashed up together.

In our work right now, we've moved away from designing the landscape to attempting to operate on the cultural body itself. Ecocide has emerged from cultural dynamics, and therefore to address it, we need cultural change. We do this through a few ways: creating sacred spaces and rituals that guide people to face and connect with the implications of our changing planet, and creating transformative experiences that allow for deep learning at the level of the unconscious with the potential to shift worldview. Research in climate psychology and sociology shows that these methods are key tentpoles to constructing healthier relationships with the environment.

What do we ourselves need to do, and be, in order to do this work? What kind of techniques does the work itself require? What follows is a dive into this—a partially-illuminated journey into the caverns of our unlearning and relearning craft. Partially-illuminated by necessity, because there is so much we don't know and are still working to understand, so much knowledge held by others that we stand humble before, and so much to discover within ourselves.

INTUITION	TRANSMUTATION	TRUTH TELLING
TRANCE	RESEARCH	EMBODIMENT
PRACTICE	ANCESTRY	UNCERTAINTY



INTUITION

“Setting my life free from the head's agenda...to unfold where intuition is leading me.”²

*Fig. 02 - (above)
Chaos Blossoms,
Nocturnal Medicine.*

We move from intuition. Intuition is the opposite of detachment from the subject; it is embodying the sensing body and moving with other forms. It is “the journey from our conscious mind to the unconscious level.”³ When we are caught up in confusion, constructs and restraints, intuition allows us a way out through going down—through submersion into the unconscious seas. It is the sinking below the thinking body into the feeling self.

TRANCE

Trance is discussed within meditation, religion, collective dance, magic, art-making (as in a flow state). It is often understood as a kind of altered consciousness—a liminal state of suspension between wakefulness and deep sleep. Trance can be a pathway through which intuition moves from within to the without, a channel through which it is accessed and flows into material form. There are known gateways to trance states (i.e. dance, hypnosis, meditation, chemical substances), and through practice they may be achieved at will. In trance states, we may discover truths and connections that otherwise elude us; we may touch into the underneath of ourselves, and journey through the flow of ourselves, through our collectivity with others, through time-space, and intertwine with the dynamic forces at play.



In the tradition of mediumship, working from trance states allows us to bring forth emanations from the void that may be beyond our conscious mind.

PRACTICE

I cannot speak on what I have not known; I cannot lead to where I have no understanding. Thus the necessity of practice. Practice within the design disciplines often refers to a professional vehicle—“my practice.” The structure of technical and organizational authority through which I exercise my expertise. This is different from “practice” as in to keep trying without finality on the immediate horizon—to grow a set of skills through the definitively unfinal doing of the thing.

The exploration and transformation of the self is the practice. Practice is the continuous return to the attempt: to unlearn what must be unlearned, to understand what has been beyond understanding, to surrender in the face of what can never be known, controlled, or changed, to “unfold where intuition is leading me.”⁴

Practice is the nights spent on the dance floor. In the words of choreographer Michele Rizzo, dancing is “the practice that compensate[s] for the fact that we can never be each other.”⁵ Practice is the daily living with grief and joy, the constant calling of attention to my relationships, my context, and my responsibilities. Practice is the time spent in reverence to and communication with the sacred, wherever you find it. Such as—“For me the clubs are kind of the new temples,” says musician Aisha Devi.⁶ Clubs are sites of deep play—places that offer the potential for altered states of liberation, for touching into “the sacred and the holy” and in so doing sinking into “who we are and all we wish to be.”⁷

TRANSMUTATION & MOVING BETWEEN REALMS

How [to] represent on a two-dimensional surface a three-dimensional form, or in a three-dimensional image a multi-dimensional meaning?...As dreams that were momentous by night may seem simply silly in the light of day, so the poet and the prophet can discover themselves playing the idiot before a jury of sober eyes. But...the work of representing eternity in time, and perceiving in time eternity, cannot be avoided.⁸

Fig. 03 (previous spread) - Under the Tongue, Nocturnal Medicine.

It doesn't seem to be enough to voyage the intuitive realms, to sail the blissful seas of sensuality on the creative journey. What has been learned must be brought back and shared with the world-at-large. In a recent conversation with Mahtab Max Moinian, we discussed the phrase “as within, so without;” that while the interior journey and the development of the self are necessary (as within), there is a responsibility to communicate learning and enact change (so without). It is the responsibility discussed by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*—that the true task is not the journey, but the conveying of what was seen and learned.

Here, the rigors of architectural technique have their place. These tools have been developed over millennia in order to structure our perceptions of the polyphony of entities that churn, squirm and gyrate themselves to form “the world.” Through these tools, we may create the grounds for clarity of intention and intervention. The movement between modes of perceiving and articulation is iterative and non-linear—from intuition, trance, practice and play to the plan and diagram, translating multi-dimensional understandings into precise forms with a specificity of dimension, scale and material.

RESEARCH

Reference to and reverence for what has come before. Research is a conversation with what is outside myself—across space and time—and through research my body of understanding can grow beyond the limitations of my own locality. Research allows us to receive that which has been metabolized and understood by others. Through research, we map the ground on which we stand; we uncover its caverns and byways, the texture of its soils, and we receive support in envisioning what is possible.

ANCESTRY

“We carry the energetic suffering of our ancestry.”⁹

Designing for a world shaped by violences demands that you know who you are. What worlds do you contain? What is yours to mend, to reckon with, to heal from, to release, to reclaim? On what grounds do you step into the realm of intervention?

Within our practice, we work as a hybrid body with multiple parts. We are not one legacy, we are many. Persian, Istrian, Italian-American, Jewish, Catholic, Los Angeles, New Jersey, brown, white, immigrant: 1st-generation, 2nd-generation, 4th-generation. And we are designing for communities that are like this—complex agglomerations of ancestral pasts who've all shown up in the same space at a particular moment.

And so it is like this—being the thing that you are, being grounded in your own identity and your own ancestral legacy and its pain and joy, knowing your own place in the story and your own set of responsibilities, and from there feeling out when to follow, when to speak, when to nod your head and shake your hips from the edge of the circle, and when to guard space fiercely without stepping into it.

TRUTH TELLING

“Commitment to truth telling lays the groundwork for the openness and honesty that is the heartbeat of love.”¹⁰

bell hooks teaches that honesty is the foundation of a loving society. In this way, commitment to truth telling is at the heart of the work. When we talk about climate change, when we talk about environmental degradation, we need to be as clear as possible about the truths on the table. How did we get here? For the first time, this year the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) put out a report that named “colonialism” as a cause and perpetuator of climate change. In the words of Brazilian Indigenous activist Taily Terena, “Colonialism caused climate change. Our rights and traditional knowledge are the solution.”¹¹

*Fig. 04 - (below)
Sun Stone Abyss,
Nocturnal Medicine.*



The United States of America is built out of ideologies that call for massive-scale acts of genocide and enslavement of peoples and war-fueled, wealth-oriented domination of land. Those ideologies continue to govern the country, its actions towards those not protected under its patriarchal white supremacist model, and its attitude towards the global community. Let’s be honest about that.

Being honest is not about guilt or shaming; really, it has nothing to do with them. Listen to Layli Long-Soldier citing Faith Spotted Eagle, saying “for non-Native people, hearing and listening to these narratives, these histories, and engaging in a conversation, it is not about guilt, and it’s not about shame. It is about...‘freedom from denial.’ It allows a liberation.”¹²

Truth telling is liberation. Sociologist Kari Norgaard identified that at the heart of climate change inaction in wealthy Western countries is a form of denial that is orchestrated at the social-cultural level—a system of relational protocols that help people avoid acknowledging the realities of climate change with their deepest selves; that keep the truth outside so that the illusion of existential safety can be preserved.¹³ Deep transformational shifts are not only necessary, but they are coming, denial or not. Through truth telling, we can rise to the occasion of our own evolution.

EMBODIMENT

We are trying to make work as an instance, an occurrence, of a regenerated world. We do not make models or prototypes—no, it IS the thing, temporarily formed. The work takes seriously the idea that things could be different, and it embodies that world, often only for a night before the sun rises and things are as they are. “The apocalypse is always easier to imagine,” writes Rebecca Solnit, “than the strange, circuitous routes to what comes next.”¹² In the face of harm and destruction, we aim to walk, crawl, slither the path to what comes next.

This is not just true of the work itself, but of the way it’s done. Can we embody, in our relationship with each other as partners, in our relationships with networks of allies, collaborators, conspirators, in our relationship with money and resources, a world that is the one we dream of? We fail often, and even more often we don’t know the path, but it is a constant, active practice of refusal to succumb to the terrors of what is.

The work itself is an invitation to embodiment. To let our collective pain and pleasure flow within us, to invite it to entangle and swirl with the visceral sensations of mud in our fingers, smoke in our lungs, to grow our vitality from and with the muck.

Through the touch of bodies, we open to the beauty and power of others. We allow ourselves to be changed through the touch of another, and for that touch to remind us what is sacred in them, and in us. Embodiment can pierce avoidance and the illusion of tidiness and separateness, and bring us into the stew of “everything everywhere all at once.”

UNCERTAINTY

“Darkness might be a medium of vision, and descent may be a movement toward revelation.”¹⁵

The welcoming of uncertainty as the inescapable state—in the design process, in the construction and enacting of work, and in living. The ability to thrive in uncertainty, and to be resilient and flow with the unpredictable, is essential as we continue our roll into an era marked by shifts in longstanding patterns (i.e., in seasonal cycles).

In our work, we often work in the format of the event and experience—formats in which the participants are invited agents in the tenor and lifespan of the work. Its “success” rides on them. As designers, we feel the way this tempts anxiety—the knot of fear in our bellies birthed from knowing we cannot control the outcome and failure is possible. Again and again, we bring ourselves to face the uncertainty inherent in relational work (which all landscape architecture is, whether it acknowledges it or not), and to face the fear it provokes. A design that attempts to edit out the possibility of the unexpected is grasping at the illusion of complete power in the face of the truth that we can’t know, we can’t control; living is an act of risk.

We hope to find the strength that comes from embracing the unknown—that paradoxically this may be the only way to be safe, or at least, to be at ease. And that through this stance, we can ride with the changes that are to come our way. We want to make work that can be a lantern—that walks you down the darkening path, the light slowly diminishing as you go, until you are left in the void to discover in yourself your own capacity for swimming in nothing. We want to make work that celebrates you once you find yourself there, and through that celebration, births a community resilient, loving, and ready.

Notes

1. Timothy Morton, “Zero Landscapes in the Time of Hyperobjects,” *Graz Architectural Magazine*, Spring 2011, 78–87.
2. M.A. Beat feat. Laraaji, “Brain Off,” Track 1 on *Sans soleil*, BMM Records, 2017.
3. Erkkka Laininen, “Transforming Our Worldview Towards a Sustainable Future,” in *Sustainability, Human Well-Being, and the Future of Education*, ed. Justin W. Cook (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 178.
4. M.A. Beat feat. Laraaji, *Brain Off*.
5. Isabel Parkes, “Michele Rizzo Stages Acts of ‘Communal Becoming,’” *Frieze*, November 24, 2021, <https://www.frieze.com/article/michele-rizzo-stages-acts-communal-becoming>.
6. “The Ritualistic Live Celebration of Aisha Devi: MUTEK 2016.” Youtube video. Posted by FACTmagazine, August 4, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e_HiQJSoH4A.
7. Maria Popova, “Diane Ackerman on the Evolutionary and Existential Purpose of Deep Play,” *The Marginalian*, August 4, 2016, <https://www.themarginalian.org/2016/08/04/diane-ackerman-deep-play/>.
8. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).
9. Lama Rod Owens (@lamarodofficial), *Liberation of Ancestors*, May 4 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdJY7Q3jz9W/>.
10. bell hooks, *all about love: new visions*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 53.
11. Yessenia Funes, “Yes, Colonialism Caused Climate Change, IPCC Reports.” *Atmos: The Frontline*, April 4 2022, <https://atmos.earth/ipcc-report-colonialism-climate-change/>.
12. Layli Long Soldier (*Layli Long Soldier: The Freedom of Real Apologies*), interview with Krista Tippett, *On Being*, podcast audio, March 30, 2017, <https://onbeing.org/programs/layli-long-soldier-the-freedom-of-real-apologies/>.
13. Kari Norgaard, *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011).
14. Rebecca Solnit. *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*. (Chicago: Nation Books, 2006).
15. Roberb Macfarlane (*Robert Macfarlane: The Worlds Beneath Our Feet*), interviewed by Krista Tippett, *On Being*, podcast audio, November 14, 2019, <https://onbeing.org/programs/robert-macfarlane-the-worlds-beneath-our-feet/>.