

International Journal of Education & the Arts

Special Issue: Art for the Sake of Care

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<http://www.ijea.org/>

ISSN: 1529-8094

Volume 25 Special Issue 1.16

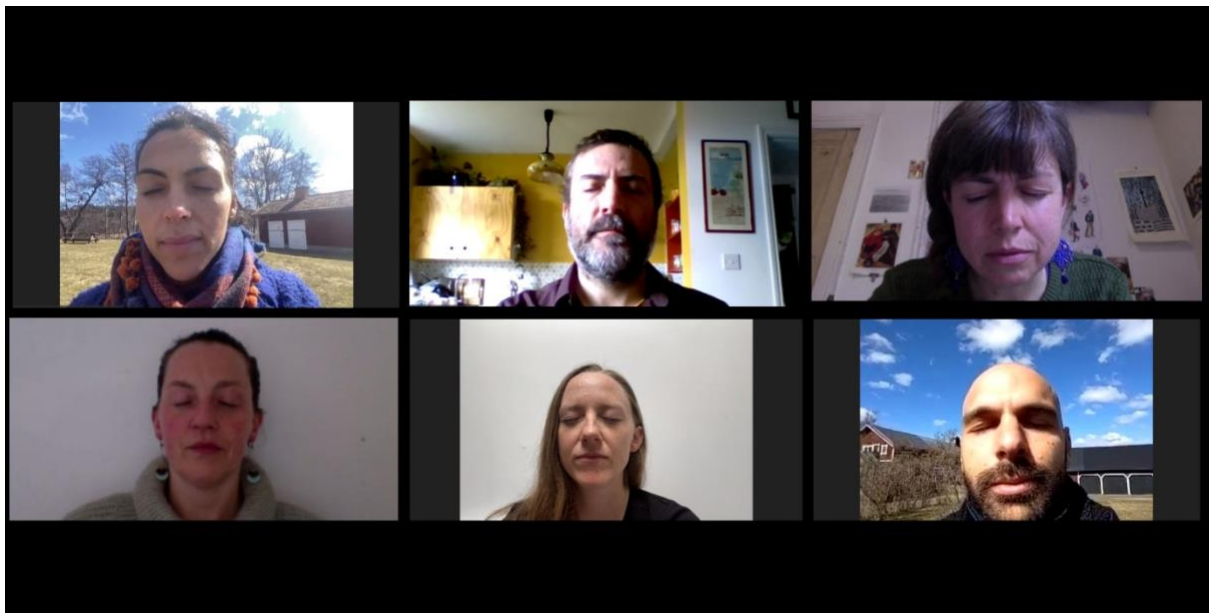
September 27, 2024

INTERMEZZO III

Where Do You Find Yourself? On Listening as a Transformative Collective Practice

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Citation: Nesbitt, I. (2024). Where do you find yourself? On listening as a transformative collective practice (intermezzo). *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 25(si1.16). <http://doi.org/10.26209/ijea25si1.16>



This intermezzo explores deep listening as a collective practice to transform our relationship with place, including non-human beings, to enter a dynamic of care with localities and others. At the heart of this intermezzo is a series of written reflections made by me during the course of a year-long process of collective listening. This experimental practice came about as an invitation by Dancing On The Edge (DOTE)¹, an arts organisation based in Amsterdam committed to the work of deconstructing and decolonizing their existing festival-based platform. I was initially invited to take part in their *Rituals for Change* series and then invited as a remote artist-in-residence, a role we rechristened ‘artist-in-resonance.’

One of my commitments was to a year of monthly listening sessions, held online. The sessions were open invite, and the group was made up of individuals from DOTE’s network, and my own. DOTE works primarily, though not exclusively with artists and practitioners from the West Asia (formerly known as the Middle East) and North Africa region and its diaspora. My own network is primarily UK-based and made up of artists, thinkers and engaged citizens. The focus on listening within my artistic practice had emerged out of the experience of a recent pilgrimage, during which time given to listening deeply to place had become one of my daily rituals. Deep listening is a very well-established practice initiated and developed by the musician and composer Pauline Oliveros until her death in 2016. Her first works of deep listening were a series of ‘scores’ in 1971 entitled *Sonic Meditations*. It was one of these scores that was my entry point during the pilgrimage into the deeper possibilities of listening. It reads, in its entirety, thus: "Take a walk at night. Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears." (Oliveros, 1974, p. 5).

I quickly found that such attentive listening could be a way to transform relationship with place, to enter into a dynamic of care with a locale, to open myself up to landscape, and to draw lines between the personal and the universal. I wanted to know if this kind of attention to the world was possible outside the extraordinary circumstances of pilgrimage. I wanted to know if it could become a collective practice. I wanted to know if it could relate to multiple localities at once, if groups of humans could come together online in order to listen together to their localities and to each other. In her essay *Quantum Listening*, Pauline Oliveros describes quantum listening as ‘listening to more than one reality simultaneously... listening in as many ways as possible – changing and being changed by the listening’ (2002). One question for this experiment has been as to whether such quantum listening is possible when groups of humans gather online. Another key question has been to what extent it is possible in such an environment to also listen with non-human beings.

¹ <https://dancingontheedge.nl/>

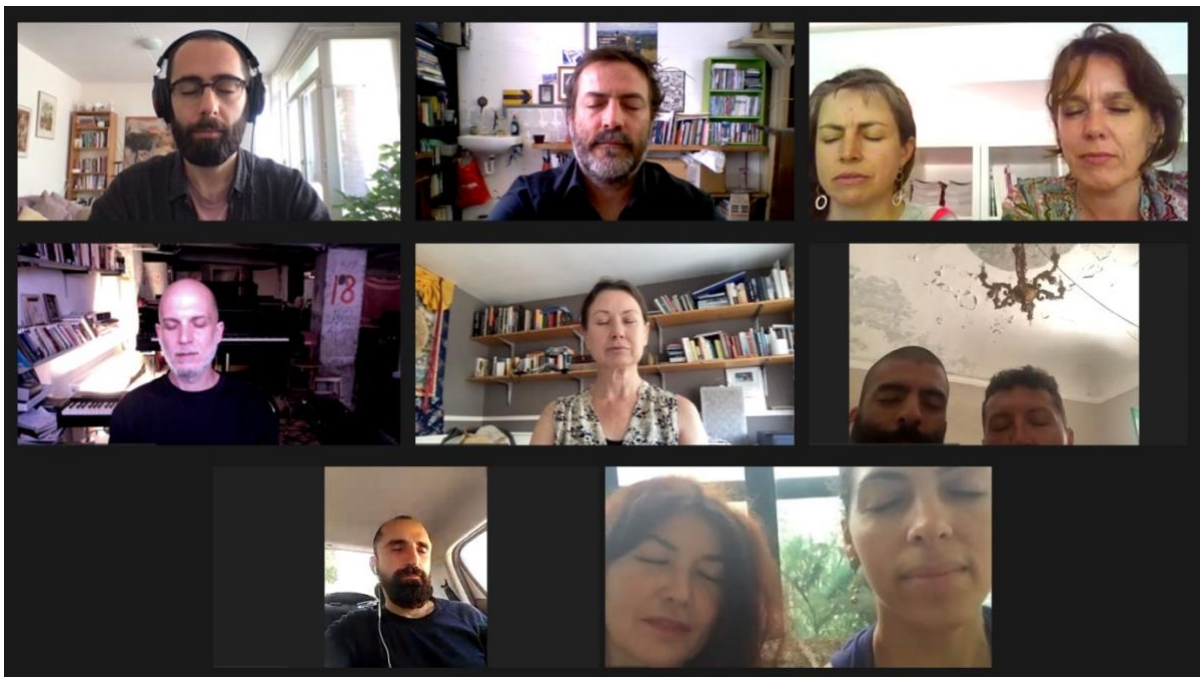
Sessions were attended by between five and fifteen individuals, many from artistic or creative backgrounds, though by no means exclusively. Participants would join the sessions from all over the world, with a focus on those arriving from the Middle East, Netherlands and UK. I developed a prompt, which would be the same each time the group met and would allow for interpretation on several levels. I re-present some of that introduction here:

Thank you for joining us. This is an exploratory collective practice that focuses on transformative listening. It is not a space for conversation or responding directly to what others say, but for taking time to listen deeply to each other, and to share what emerges. There may be significant silences. This is absolutely fine.

In a moment, I'm going to invite you to respond to the prompt 'where do you find yourselves?'

Asking where we find ourselves calls us into dialogue with our surroundings. It calls us to notice with whom or what we are entangled, to behold our relationships with the worlds of others, and to act out of care. We hold space for individual and collective yearning, for the griefs that emerge from our localities and our globality, and for that which does not make sense yet.

So, where do you find yourself?

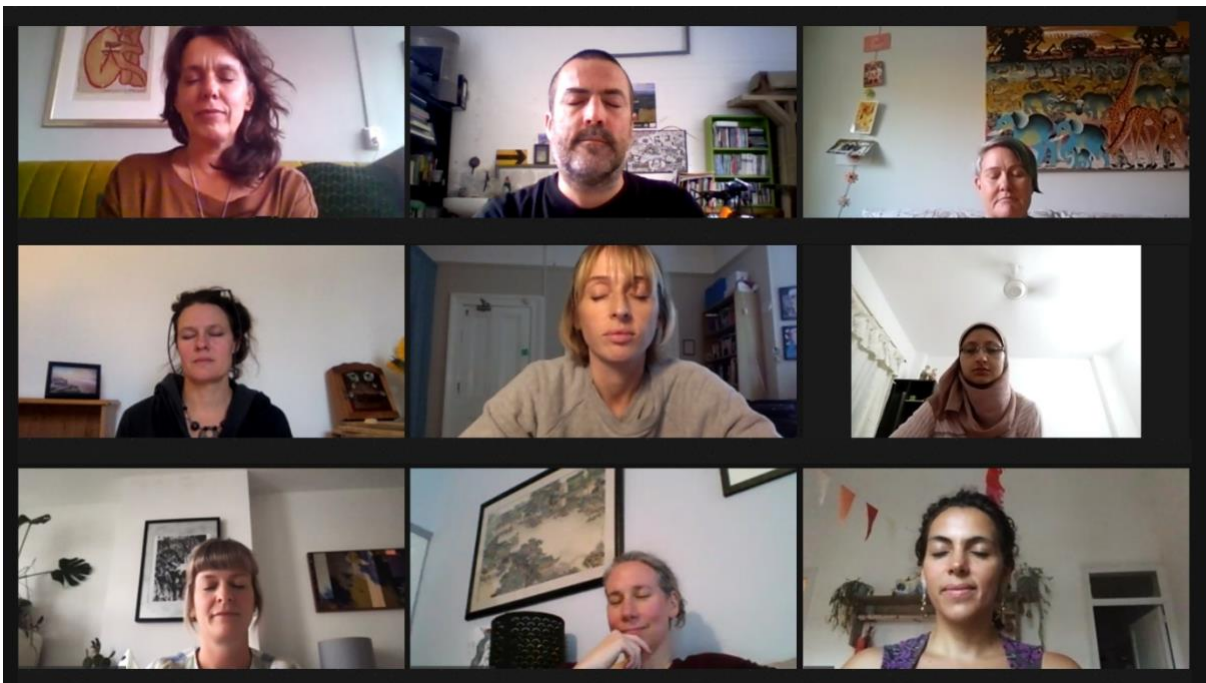


#1

26.07.22

I am trying to consider this space as separate, or at least parallel to my art practice, in that I resist the urge to document, to progress, to work towards an outcome, to do what is expected of me as an artist. However, I did want to note down some reflections on what has happened so far. To use the same rationale of the sessions, where I find myself is in a space of both intimacy and spaciousness; intimate because the sessions have been characterised by an uncommon openness and care-fulness that moves me every time, and spacious because they could develop in any direction.

The beginning of the process was quite nerve-wracking, like any exploratory practice. Holding space for whatever emerges is not easy, especially the first time. As the sessions have gone on, I find it easier to let go, trying to become less like a facilitator. After the end of the second session, in which there was quite a bit of silence, my sense was that it hadn't gone well. However, what followed when we closed the circle was an extremely rich conversation, in which I learned that silence does not equal disengagement. We decided in this conversation that sharing need not be in English, or even in verbal language. A sense of the process, I could even say ritual, carrying this loose collective of people who choose to be in this space, grows with each session.



#2

21.10.22

We listen to each other speaking and we listen to each other refrain from speaking. We listen together to sounds from our individual environments that punctuate our shared silence: children playing in Amsterdam, birds in a tree in Alexandria, a coffee being delivered to a cafe table in Palermo, the dusk falling in Paris, a laptop overheating in Sheffield. We listen to the silences that we build together, which have something of a healing quality for the knowing that we have built them together.

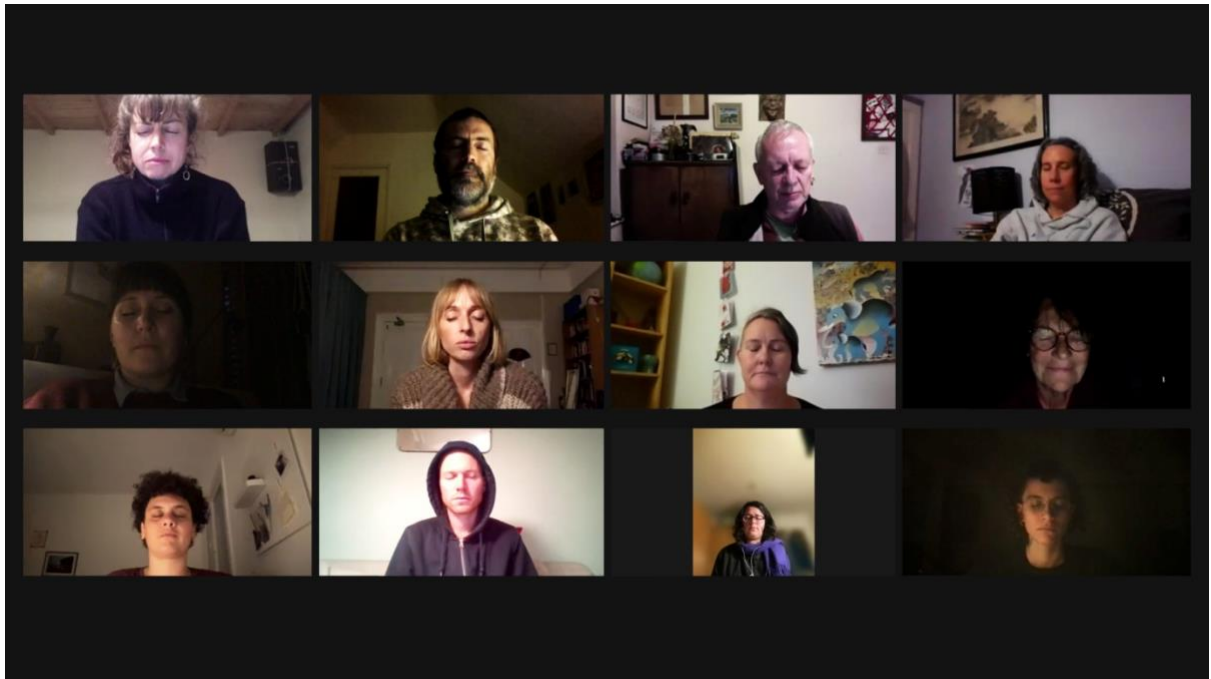
We have now been developing this practice together for six months, with new and now familiar faces arriving each time, and what I have been most struck by as the sessions have progressed, is how each time is so markedly different. The rhythm and feel of each session is distinct, held by the growing experience within the group, and also invigorated by those experiencing it for the first time.

I have been learning from the writing and thinking Pauline Oliveros, the founder of the deep listening movement, and noticed something that Pauline's life partner Ione mentioned in her recollections about her experience of facilitating Pauline's *Tuning meditation*, a piece first performed by seventy-five singers at the Guggenheim Museum in 1981. One instruction for the meditation is:

Inhale deeply; exhale on the note of your choice; listen to the sounds around you and match your next note to one of them; on your next breath make a note no one else is making; repeat. Call it listening out loud (Tuning Meditation).

Recalling facilitating this work with audiences, Ione recalls how, in the exercise of "listening to our listening", as she describes it, "something special, something both old and new, occurred. Something healing". Pauline herself once spoke about how practiced listening continues to evolve, consistently yielding new information, and there is something of this beginning to emerge out of our sessions.

One recent session began to feel like a magical séance, as multiple synchronicities curiously wove themselves through the fabric of our shared space, so that all we could do was to laugh together. The most recent session took place over dusk for many of the localities on the call, and as our windows darkened, we listened to each other speak in shared and native languages. For some this meant casting words into the void, not knowing if they were being understood, and for others it meant listening beyond language to what else is held in the voice.



#3

20.02.23

Now three-quarters of the way through this year of listening together, my thoughts turn inevitably towards the end of that cycle. The format for each session has been the same throughout, which has helped me to refrain from thinking beyond the session itself towards future developments, allowing me to focus on my evolving relationship to this curious space that we've grown together. I wonder if other regular participants have some version of this experience.

I have used it hesitantly throughout, but I do think that practice is the right word for what we've been exploring together. This morning, I read a new Substack post by the artist and Tai Chi teacher Caroline Ross, which dropped serendipitously into my inbox this morning just as I was thinking about this, in which she writes "To be complete, a practice or Way must have an element of non-doing, as well as an apparent form." In this co-listening practice, the silence we share is our non-doing. After a recent session, one participant reflected on the different qualities of silence before, during and after the session, and others were quick to agree. It led me to expand my sense of how it is possible to grow together through digital space, even only through silence, and now to a deeper appreciation of the importance of non-doing.

Caroline continues:

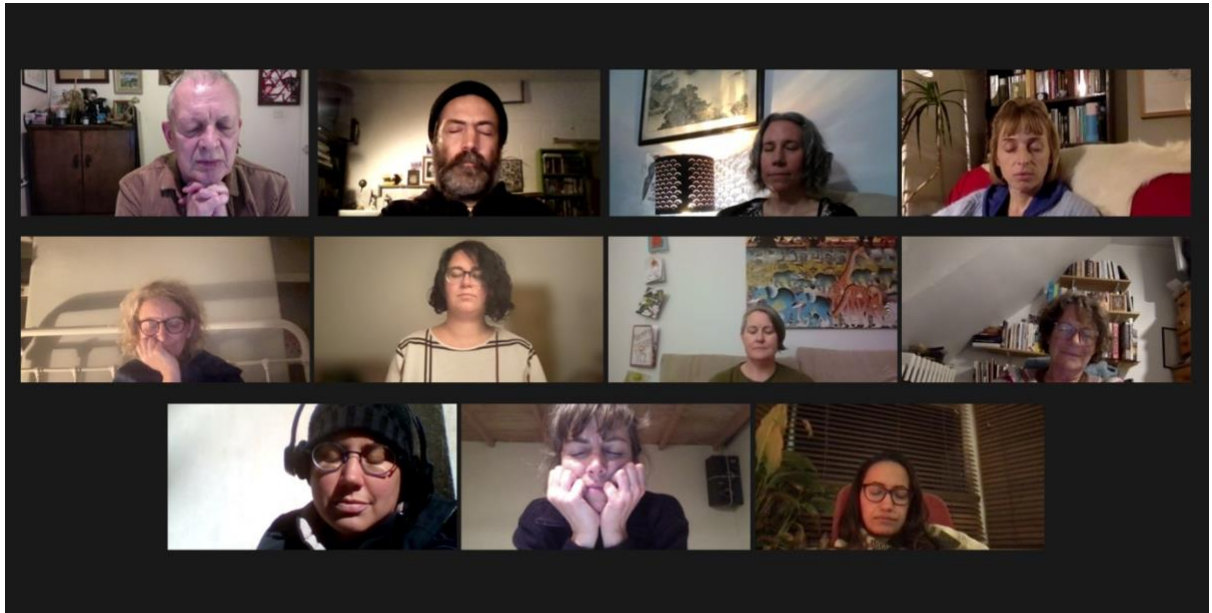
In much meditation, one does not ‘do’ anything much, the effort is in returning the mind and body to relaxed open emptiness from its habitual state of over-use (or torpor). Once settled, the mind is not held tightly, instead, a non-reactive, steadfast quality arises. We become like bogs: absorptive, unclear, not immediately useful, slower, fuller, moderating the flows of thought and life, like peat.

I like to imagine that what we are doing when we meet is a version of this bog-becoming, a group of strangers growing into each other. It has been my experience that once the subsoil exists, by which I mean that once there is a core of people in each session for whom this practice has become familiar, then significant amounts of bog-becoming can happen even in just one session of ninety minutes.

Each session we respond to the question ‘where do you find yourself?’. It has been tempting to change the prompt but each time we face this question we deepen our connection to it. Somehow it happens that most people, when they choose to speak, begin by saying ‘I find myself...’. For me, the insistence on using this phrase feels like an impromptu observance of ritual, a signifier that emerged out of our practice. Each time someone says it we are returned to the connective tissue of our togetherness. One regular attendee frames it differently, seeing it as a way of puncturing the membrane between physical aloneness and shared silence. Either way, it has become part of our practice.

In the last session, a new participant asked, ‘Am I supposed to find myself?’. In the silence that followed, I realised that getting lost is something we are learning to do together. There is no map for this work, no outcomes, no pathway, nothing that is supposed to happen, either individually or collectively. Those who return are invariably drawn by something they can’t quite explain, something that lies out beyond daily experience, inviting us to be together in a different way. Getting lost in a time of mapping is an act of resistance. As author, poet, and Professor Bayo Akomolafe says, ‘*to find our way, we must first get lost*’², and suggests that Western culture yearns for lostness. Maybe what we are doing here is some version of that, reaching for the spaces beyond the edges of the maps of modernity and coloniality.

² In the May 3, 2021 podcast episode of the Becoming the People Podcast with Prentis Hemphill: <https://www.findingourwaypodcast.com/individual-episodes/s2e3>



#4

15.06.2023

Pinned on the wall of my studio are several scraps of paper, on which are written embryonic attempts to articulate this year of listening together. The term 'practice of togetherness' appears consistently, scattered through with questions like 'Can listening help us to live better with the consequences of a collapsing system?' and 'what are the revolutionary properties of silence?'. The longer this scrawled constellation remains, though, what emerges most clearly is my reluctance to pin it down. I grapple now with the task of writing conclusively about a practice that resists the framing of conclusion. Instead, then, I decide to describe the sessions that have taken place since last writing and see what floats to the surface.

February feels like reaching a long way back from the balmy green of midsummer. I remember thinking there was more silence. Someone says that they feel lost in a forest. I try to articulate the feeling of sinking into unknown languages. Someone else shares that attending the group feels like meeting in a clearing in the fog, though she doesn't say whether the image is on land or at sea. I imagine a congregation of coracles. Another speaks of having to re-find themselves after listening to others speaking, of becoming immersed each time in the experience of another.

The next time we meet, it is over an hour before anyone speaks. Then someone says, "I feel myself listening at many levels now", and this is followed by an outburst of birdsong. I do not know in whose locality is the blackbird, or the song thrush, or the others that I cannot identify,

but their insistence to be heard today is striking. I turn my chair away from the screen and look out of a window facing the sky. The ramifications of this practice seem amplified. Later, many of those present express that this was the session they found most moving.

Late April comes around. The last session doesn't feel like the end of a journey together, more like a solstice, birthday or some such; the circular pilgrimage of the seasons coming to its ending, only to start over. Each month has been different and in some ways this is the least notable, but there is an easy conviviality that I haven't noticed before; a warm chuckle, a nod of recognition, solidarity in a bowing of the head or a closing of the eyes. No-one wants to draw conclusions, and I'm glad for that.

Amongst the scraps on my wall is a single yellow post it note. There were others but they fell off. On it is written and circled 'holding space for the minutiae of lives playing out in a collapsing system.' My eyes keep returning to it as I sit here. It draws me because there is nothing else on my wall that acknowledges how to fit this snowballing recognition - that our way of life might be coming to an end - into the rituals of our daily lives. How does the question of 'how to approach the end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it' move through us as we clean our teeth, walk the dog, or wait to speak with a machine about debt repayment?

If this sounds dramatic, it doesn't feel that way to me. There has been, over the last decade, a growing body of thinking, artmaking, writing, and maybe even science, that lies somewhere out beyond the idea that we can save the world from impending climate catastrophe. The Dark Mountain website is as good a place to start this research³. One emphasis of this work is to not turn away, but to stay with the trouble of it, to understand that we might not have a solution, and in that eventuality, to ask 'what next?'. In the space that opens up, we might refocus our attention, care and radical energy on the local, the interpersonal, the collective, and the relationships that we have in our daily lives with other beings. What I call practices of togetherness re-situate care in the everyday, relocating our potential as care givers and care receivers away from the purchased self-care of the wellbeing industry, therapy and one-on-one treatments, and back towards the collective. We build local and trans-local networks of interdependence, and maybe we improve our collective capacity to face the future realities of an unsaved world in all its grief and joy, wonder and drudgery.

But I am getting carried away, asking too much, looking for solutions, off down that rabbit hole. At the beginning of this co-listening experiment, I wanted to spend one year in this

³ <https://dark-mountain.net/>

practice. I wanted to show up each month in a mode of attentive togetherness. I wanted to encourage others to do the same, and to see where it might take us. After one year together, there is no particular learning, no particular conclusion to offer, just a commitment to continuing to explore this loose mode of togetherness.



The philosopher and mystic Simone Weil wrote extensively on the nature of attention. In her writings, I notice some interesting comparisons to some observations that I have been led to by this work. Firstly, she proposed the question ‘What are you going through?’ as, according to Sophie Bourgault, “a recognition that the sufferer exists, not simply as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labelled ‘unfortunate’, but as a man, exactly like us” (2016, p. 323). The question ‘Where do you find yourself?’ can also be viewed in these terms, building on Weil’s foundation by explicitly situating the question in the context of our relationship to the world around us. One of the aspects of these sessions most universally acknowledged by participants has been the decentring of the need to understand the meaning of speech. Because the sessions have been accessed by people from many localities, speaking many languages, there was early on an invitation to share in other languages than English. There was one session in which participants shared in six different languages. I found it so exciting because it felt to me such a deepening and enrichment of our shared space. One participant reflects that “there is an opportunity to listen beyond meaning, to find the spirit behind the meaning.” Simone Weil (1943) states that “...a mind enclosed in language is in prison” (p.69), and in some small way this collective reaching beyond the primacy of the meaning inherent in language allowed us at the very least to understand language as the “space of partial truth” (p. 69) that Weil names. It also represented a momentary unshackling

of legacies of colonialism held within the insistence on defaulting to English in multilingual spaces.

Another convergence can be found in Robert Zaretsky's (2021) assertion that Weil's goal was "to reflect upon a problem, rather than to resolve it"⁴, a sentiment I find echoed in my own invitation to participants to 'hold space for that which doesn't make sense yet'. These, then, are the times we are living in, times in which a culture of identifying problems and solving them has been found wanting, times in which we might have to admit that our dominant way of being in the world does not have the answers to the mounting catastrophes that we face, times in which the question of what it might mean to 'stay with the trouble', to borrow a phrase from Donna Haraway, holds growing cultural weight. Zaretsky notes that "to attend means not to seek, but to wait; not to concentrate, but instead to dilate our minds." He focuses on Weil's claim that "we do not gain insights by going in search of them, but instead by waiting for them." I find myself musing on what Weil would have made of 'staying with the trouble'.

It may also be worth noting parallels between the time of Weil's writing and our own, in terms of riding the aftershocks of cataclysmic world events: World War One and the Covid pandemic respectively. Her work, like a growing body of contemporary artists and thinkers, appears to recognise the limitations of the dominant culture of the time to address emergent issues. Similarly, her instinct seems to have been to slow down, to wait and reflect, to resist conclusion.

And so, I reach that difficult moment of being forced to conclude the inconclusive. Since the practice continues, there seems to be little to offer by way of conclusion. In acknowledgement of the nature of this practice, however, I want to honour the collectivism at the heart of the work by ending with words gathered together from the reflections of participants.

We allow ourselves to show up. We are open to connection. We understand beyond words. We value sensing and making sense equally. We reflect together on times of change. We come with grief sitting on our shoulders. We allow the otherwise to show up. We explore the spaces between words and thoughts. We hear language as noise, music, abstraction. We welcome the birds. We are drawn together by silence. We are vulnerable. We just want to be here.

⁴ <https://lithub.com/simone-weils-radical-conception-of-attention/>

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About the Author

Ian Nesbitt is a socially engaged artist, filmmaker, writer, and pedestrian based in Sheffield, UK. His work holds space for the question of what it means to practice togetherness in a collapsing system. Working alongside citizens, communities and the more-than-human to consider and create spaces for exchange that are beyond the everyday, his work seeks to further emerging readings of these shared and entangled territories.

He has been a founder member of DIY arts and cultural organisations Annexinema, Out.Side.Film, Social Art Network, Radio Commons and Open Kitchen Social Club. His work has been platformed across Europe and the UK since 2005. He recently completed commissions for *Dancing On The Edge* (Amsterdam) and *Gentle/Radical* (Cardiff). He is currently working on an exhibition at Harris Museum (Preston) in Spring 2025, in collaboration with Ruth Levene, and working on his long form project 'The Book of Visions.'

International Journal of Education & the Arts

<http://IJEa.org>

ISSN: 1529-8094

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