The art of sympoiethics

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In this article the authors explore their collaborative arts practice as rooted in an ecocentric worldview, in which existence is a continuum of relational and embodied exchanges between ourselves, each other, and the matter and habitats of the animate Earth. Thus our capacity for being, thinking, making and acting is a reciprocal entanglement within this interdependence. They introduce sympoiethics as a participatory consciousness which guides interactions with soil care, food cultures, thanks-giving rituals and regenerative farming. They share *Sacred Mayonnaise*, a ritual conducted as part of an installation Everything is Here at the group exhibition *Ecovention Europe: Art to Transform Ecologies*.

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As ecological artists, our work is rooted in the recognition that our humanity flourishes as part of the animate and interdependent systems of the living Earth. Our breath, our nutrition, our gut flora, our habitats, our thoughts, our emotions, our dreams, our metaphors, our ways of knowing, our consciousness are all in a sacred continuum of exchange with the matter, ecological processes and energies of place. Traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdoms recognize this embodied, relational worldview as a unifying consciousness where, in kinship with Gaia, "we participate in the intimacy of all things with each other" (Berry, 2006: 137).

The biological term *sympoiesis* describes the interconnected nature of ecosystems, which are distinguished by "linkages, feedback, co-operation, and synergistic behaviour rather than boundaries" (Dempster 2000: 4). The word derives from the Ancient Greek *syn* meaning 'together with, jointly', and *poiein* meaning 'to make, create', thus evoking the collective production of life. Through her practice-based research, Miche Fabre Lewin evolved the concept

of *sympoiethics*. Adding 'ethics' to 'sympoiesis' highlights how human actions are an active influence within the ecological dynamics of adaptive, evolutionary world-making. Recognizing our interdependence within the interconnected whole of *Anima Mundi* encourages a commitment to daily practices which support the co-creative nature of Gaia's living systems. Indeed, from a sympoiethic perspective, cultivating a quality of care is a necessary ethical intention and action.

As a lodestar, sympoiethics orients us towards a life-affirming experience of ecocentricism. Human liberation is reconnected to ecological restoration through repositioning the human being as one of the many organisms amidst the multisentience of our cosmos. The flourishing of our humanity is expressed as a respecting of, responding to and making-with the ecology and spirit of place. The word 'ethics' derives from the Ancient Greek term *ethos*, which can refer to a place where people come to know and develop values together. Sympoiethics thereby suggests that the making of character and practising of right action are entwined with how we dwell in place (Ryan *et al.*, 2016: 7). As such, sympoiethics links to other realms of creative practice such as ecopoietics, which explores how language can make sense of and cultivate a co-creative dwelling with the Earth.

Art and the aesthetics of living

A sympoiethic life is one which engages us within daily practices of noticing that we are embedded within the physical forces, material interactions and cyclic processes of animate Earth – that we live within communities of kinship. Art is one of the means by which we can experience and expand these interactions, as it enlivens our body's myriad intelligences through which we can connect to the whole. Curator of the Green Museum Sam Bower writes of art being the work of consciousness that animates a reciprocal and healthy relationship between nature and culture (in Whittaker, 2009). Our socially-engaged art seeks to value the senses, imagination, emotion, metaphor and memory as pathways for nurturing such relationships – art as an act of attention that engages our thoughts and feelings as an integrated bodymind.

Seeing art as a medium for sympoiethic apprehension and engagement reconnects us to the ancient root of the word 'art' (as well as the words 'artisan' and 'ritual') – the Sanskrit term *rta*. *Rta* translates as 'truth' or 'order', and in Hindu philosophy refers to "the dynamic movement from which all arises" (Haley, 2016: 46). Sympoiethic art embraces the making of artworks or artefacts, and the matter and processes of everyday living arts such as cooking, growing food and ritual-making. We grow our humanity within such artistic exchanges as they enrich our capacity for attending to our own inner worlds in communion with outer world experiences.

Working with an expanded conception of art opens us to an embodied expression of the word 'aesthetic'. The Ancient Greek root 'aeistheta' means 'things perceptible by the senses', thus enlivening our physical experience of and capacity for knowing the world through sensing, feeling and thinking. We consider aesthetics as a health-giving engagement with the visceral and

reciprocal exchange between habitat and human, nature and culture. Living aesthetically thus unifies our human experiences and sensibilities within embodied and emergent processes of communication, sense-making and co-creation with each other and the animate world.

Rituals of reconnection within food and farming

A sympoiethic aesthetic enlarges our capacity to feel enlivened through a sensuous relationship with the Earth. Our contribution as artists is to draw on the power of food and regenerative farming to bring people together, to nourish our thinking, and to provide tangible experiences of our Earthly co-dependence. After all, food shapes our lives – impacting on land and energy use, water and soil quality, human health and freedom, cityscapes and regional climates. Through collaborative engagement, we attend to processes of sowing, growing, harvesting, cooking, composting and food sharing – all of which encompass the cycle of living food.

A central thread of our work is Miche's 30-year practice of choreographing forms of contemporary thanks-giving food rituals. The word 'ritual' exists within 'spiritual', reminding us of the sacred nature of our service as human beings to each other and to the animate world. Bounded in the liminal and protective space of a ritual structure, Miche's work shares an enlivening experience of our extensive relationships to food. She does this by making visible and tangible the physical beauty and colour of raw vegetables and their connection to regenerative living soils in which they were grown. Her rituals also introduce participants to artisan processes of growing and preparing simple health-giving dishes. By devising rituals within which to experience food in unfamiliar yet safe conditions, people are offered an embodied understanding that naturally-grown, ecological food is not only vital medicine for the body's immunity, but it also strengthens small-scale, regenerative and resilient farming practices which restore the health of living soil and water systems.

Once commissioned, the artistic process of devising a ritual engages us with the ecology and inhabitants of a place. This research process begins with attending to the living matter of food and soil within the geography in which we find ourselves. We ask 'where are the organic kitchen gardens, allotments and farms which serve this locality?'. This question leads us towards finding a growing space – a garden, a field, an allotment or forest garden – to encounter and gather the source of ecological food, namely the living soil. Gradually, the particular form of each co-created ritual emerges through dialogue and by tuning into, respecting and responding with the *genius loci* of a locality, all within a spirit of generosity and trust.

This process of evolving a ritual engages our bodyminds in relationship to the geography of a place as we sense the lay of the land and dwell without distraction or time limits. Being *à la dérive* in this fashion is a way of engaging without preconception or predetermined direction, opening us to the unknown, to serendipity and to intuitive impulses. We explore, follow leads and have conversations with local residents, whose stories and experiences provide context and lead us to artefacts to include within the ritual.

Evolving *Everything is Here* at Ecovention Europe

In September 2017, 'Ecovention Europe: Art to transform ecologies, 1957–2017' opened at Museum De Dominjnen in Sittard, the Netherlands. Curated by Sue Spaid, the exhibition brought together from across Europe artists whose work is grounded in ecological awareness and practical action. According to Spaid, 'ecoventions' are artworks that respond to environmental issues, thereby offering a model of artistic work that expands the field of art through world-transforming practices, naturally and socially (Salwa and Spaid, 2018).

Our contribution to 'Ecovention Europe' was *Everything is Here*, a retrospective installation of our collaborative work over ten years in the UK and Southern Africa. Our intention was to co-create an environment for thinking with the senses. We shared a number of artistic expressions, including printed images of artworks, *Soil Saturdays* film, drawings, artefacts from the *Hands In Soil* project, and an *Edible Love Poem* printed on cards for visitors to take away from the exhibition. We also brought sacred artefacts – a candle, bell, crystals, talismanic objects, red thread, ancestral objects – to include within a ritual *Soil Shrine*.

Preparing *Everything Is Here* installation

Edible Love Poem
If we are what we eat,
And we are of the same nature as food,
If the energy of plants transforms food
Into energy for our body-mind.
If our thoughts and intentions shape reality,
If love is intelligence

Brought into being by thinking,
And we are seeking to inhabit the new and the true
Then let us come to our senses
And find ways to honour the cyclical
Agricultural rhythms of our Earth days
Everyday every mouthful.

As part of our contribution, Sue Spaid invited Miche to share *Sacred Mayonnaise* ritual as part of the official opening of Ecovention Europe. Sue's own work is dedicated to exploring how artists bring alive the unique heritage of food, art, fields and farming. Prior to our arrival, she had made us aware of allotments and food gardens around Sittard. In spite of numerous calls from the UK to telephone numbers Sue had given us, we had had no luck reaching anyone, so our first adventure was to find the gardens and contact someone to organize a visit.

In following up on Sue's research, we came across a notice attached to railings about 500 metres from the Museum De Domijnen introducing the food gardens and sharing a contact name and number. We called and met with the community gardeners of these Low Gardens of De Gats, spent time in the different plots – orchards, flower gardens, bee gardens, social spaces - and learnt the history of these allotments and their astonishing bounty. We also learnt from Anique Hoekstra that the gardens were under immediate threat of demolition by the city authorities.

Through conversations with the gardeners we decided to convene a convivial gathering and food sharing between ourselves, Sue Spaid and the other exhibiting artists staying in Sittard. As we broke bread together and had conversations around the fire, we discovered a mutual understanding between the campaigners and the work undertaken by the exhibiting artists. What emerged was a collective proposal to craft a Declaration in support of the campaign to preserve the gardens, which would be shared within the *Everything Is Here* installation. Here is an extract from the Declaration prepared with input from the participating artists:

A Declaration of Support for the Low Gardens of De Gats
Artists of Ecovention Europe – Art to Transform Ecologies, *Sittard*
3 September 2017

Here, in the Low Gats gardens of Sittard, there is high-value nature, rich diversity of species, a strong collective spirit of support and caring, water consciousness, cultural heritage, space for families living in high density housing – the elements of what our work is pointing towards and the substance of what every city dreams of creating. We invite the city of Sittard to recognise that it has the answer. It has, in these gardens, a rare resource to be celebrated as a world-class example of what we are all looking to create in our different home countries. We see the Low Gardens of De Gats as a model in Sittard and beyond for food growing, ecosystems for endangered species, green space for families

without gardens, sound community education resource, functional high density living. For these gardens to be under threat would represent not only a devastating loss to the city and its communities, but also a devastating message to the world.

During this time, we were discovering more about the work of other artists exhibiting at Ecovention Europe. The collaborative practice Ecole Mondiale had a large floor-based map of Sittard and its environs framed by rose quartz crystals. Located adjacent to *Everything Is Here*, Ecole Mondiale offered their map as a space for Miche's ritual. Anique Hoekstra added soil from her plot to the *Soil Shrine*, deepening the exploration of how she and fellow gardeners might participate in the ritual, and thereby expose the threat to their food gardens.

Anique Hoekstra offering soil from her garden to the *Soil Shrine*

Sacred mayonnaise ritual

Through these relationships and conversations with artists, gardeners, Sue Spaid and staff at the Museum, we created a performative sequence that weaved into and around the *Sacred Mayonnaise* ritual. The flow began with Flora and a fellow artist reading the Declaration to an audience of over 100 visitors and then pinning it to a board within *Everything is Here*. Whilst this was happening, Anique wheeled a barrowful of fruits, flowers, vegetables, honey and eggs from the gardens, through the streets of Sittard to the Museum and into Exhibition space.

The Declaration of support within *Everything is Here*

The barrowful of produce within *Everything is Here*

Once Anique had arrived and installed her barrow of bounty in the Shrine, Miche began her *Sacred Mayonnaise* thanks-giving ritual on the map *Locality Grid* conceived by the collaborative artists Ecole Mondiale. In silence, Miche began the ritual by holding an egg in contemplation, then breaking it in two and separating the white from the yolk. So began the slow emulsifying with the pouring and circular stirring of olive oil into the yolk. During this contemplative ritual, Ecovention artists were selecting, cutting up and preparing the vegetables, flowers and fruits from the barrow to present on edible nasturtium leaves. Once the mayonnaise had 'taken', was glistening and unctuous in texture, the ritual was completed by the bowl of mayonnaise being offered to the audience to taste with the gardens' produce. By dipping the fresh, colourful vegetables, fruits and flowers into the velvety mayonnaise participants were able to savour the natural abundance from the gardens – a holistic education through the senses. The installation *Everything is Here* – the *Sacred Mayonnaise* ritual, the *Soil Shrine*, the *Edible Love Poem* and the Declaration of Support – raised awareness of the campaign. This inspired some visitors to read the Declaration and sign the petition opposing the destruction of these viable and sustainable sources of urban food.

Miche performing *Sacred Mayonnaise* ritual on Ecole Mondiale's Locality

Fellow artists preparing fruits, flower and vegetables

Tasting Sacred Mayonnaise with fruits of the gardens

Signing the petition within *Everything is Here*

Reflections on the art of sympoiethics

Sympoiethics reminds us that we are part of the Earth's ecosystems and that our existence unfolds within the cycles of living food, water and soil. The arts with its diverse forms and interactions has the potential to offer spaces for sympoiethic feeling and sense-making, connecting mind and body, site and psyche, nature and culture, and past, present and future. Such artistic interventions enliven our experience of relational consciousness, illuminating how living aesthetically is living ethically as we become cognizant of, and active within, the evolutionary dynamic of our shared habitats. As an intervention in the history of the Low Gardens of De Gats, *Sacred Mayonnaise* sadly did not manage to save the food allotments and the gardeners were moved to new sites. Yet the labour, vision, presence and the abundance produced in the food gardens was made evident, honoured, embodied and immortalized within an arts museum as part of an Ecovention. The culinary event cultivated solidarity between artists and growers, opened up debate between art, politics and the media, the city and its citizens, and highlighted the local campaign seeking to safeguard the food-growing gardens.

Everything Is Here and *Sacred Mayonnaise* evolved through collaboration and a sequence of mycorrhizal-like relationships – with our own bodies and practices, with the curator and the museum team, with the city and residents of Sittard, with fellow artists, and was complemented with the attendance of the guests who participated in the opening ceremony. *Sacred Mayonnaise*, a culinary meditation with eggs, embodied the spirit of place, the historic life of the food gardens, and the value of the gardeners – all through offering a sensuous and tasteful experience of the extensive relationship between food,

its growers and its source, the living soil. Such an ecocentric happening, with all its personal, social, political, ecological and spiritual dimensions, enacts how human existence and flourishing comes into being through entanglement, a making-with, a collective co-creation – the art of sympoiethics.

About the images

The images are by Touchstones Earth, 431art, Libor Bednarik and Bert Janssen.

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