

For Young Lungs. March, 2021

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Mushrooms are having a moment.

In a blog post from 2019, Scientific American proclaims: The Mycelium Revolution is Upon Us¹. It lists all of the products being developed with the help of mushrooms- replacement possibilities when it comes to construction, food, clothing, and plastics. We know mushrooms can help us deal with plastic pollution and oil spills- that their ability to process our waste goes well beyond our usual ideas of decay and half life.

Locally, our heroes at Eadha bread has centred sourdough as the foundation for their entire business. Anna Sigrithur and Joel Penner have been filming decaying foods for their film Wrought- that's W-R-O-U-G-H-T; building on her years of investigation into fermented foods.

Individually we all feel some kind of way about our commitment, or lack thereof to compost. Pride, guilt, overwhelm, confusion over what goes in the compost, vs the trash.

But mycelium has also been used to theorise relationship and social change. Social Justice Organiser Adrienne Maree Brown based a recent book, Emergent Strategy, in part on what she observes about what mycelium does, how it moves, and its relationality.

"Mycelium mushrooms have been one of my greatest teachers of trust. The word mycelium means 'more than one.' The mycelium organism is a dynamic root system of mushrooms that utilizes trust as a mechanism to build and sustain a vast, reciprocal, underground network that connects the roots of trees and plants and skillfully shares nutrients and resources to support the health of the entire ecosystem with which it moves."²

What is she talking about?

In mycorrhizal associations, plants provide fungi with food in the form of carbohydrates. In exchange, the fungi help the plants suck up water, and provide nutrients like phosphorus and nitrogen, via their mycelia.³

¹ The Mycelium Revolution is Upon Us. Bayer, Eden. Scientific American. July 1, 2020.

<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/the-mycelium-revolution-is-upon-us/>

² How the Wonder of Nature Can Inspire Social Justice Activism. Brown, Adrienne Maree. Feb 1, 2021. Yes! Solutions Journalism.

<https://www.yesmagazine.org/social-justice/2018/02/01/how-the-wonder-of-nature-can-inspire-social-justice-activism/>

³ Plants talk to each other using an internet of fungus. Fleming, Nick. BBC Earth. November 2014.

<http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20141111-plants-have-a-hidden-internet#:~:text=Plants%20talk%20to%20each%20other%20using%20an%20internet%20of%20fungus,-Hidden%20under%20your&text=It's%20an%20information%20superhighway%20that,commit%20new%20forms%20of%20crime.>

But there's more. For example, when a fungus colonises the roots of a plant, it triggers the production of defense-related chemicals. These make later immune system responses quicker and more efficient, a phenomenon called "priming". **Plants are more resistant to disease because they are plugged into mycelial networks.** Mycorrhizae also connect plants that may be widely separated. They can help transfer nutrients between species to help keep complimentary plants well fed; and they can change soil microbiomes to prevent competitive species of plants from growing- in collaboration with the host or foundational species.

Fungal networks make up the largest organism on the planet, functioning largely out of sight to let life connect, collaborate, respond.

Krystina's work in this research series is, in part, a careful and close investigation of the mechanisms of empathy and our ability as humans to respond to one another. Connection. Collective experience. To observe, to hear, to listen, to feel, to perceive, and to respond- whether in the same room, or distant from one another, or connecting over zoom. How good are we at this? What helps? What is missing? How do we evaluate the quality of empathy we are able to offer, or show, or receive? She experiments in this effort with a number of tries, collecting the dancers' observations as she goes. Using a laboratory of relationship- herself and other humans, other dancers, sometimes in the same room, sometimes over zoom, she offers her own voice and story to motivate movement. She wonders about the labour of empathy. Can the dancers enter the space of empathy, working through their bodies. Can they enter a space beyond reaction, or interpretation of her words.

She then observes how adding music changes the dynamic- a piece that she says offers a representative feeling of her story.

Her teammates talk through their experiment. At the end of her February 20th event, one dancer observes:

"There is a question of giving justice to the words that are being said. With a song you have more ability to create your own story. But when you're talking, I don't feel that I'm capable in my body to give justice to the weight of your words because they're stronger than what I feel I can express with movement. Maybe not. But I don't know what those movements are to get to the level of the weight of the words. Because there is nothing else going on, it's only the words that matter or that we are listening to. There is nothing else distracting us. We can't put the weight of the words into the beat, or into music. So it's: how to translate that into a body? And how to give it justice. Because I don't feel like I'm giving enough to your words. Especially if you care about what the person is saying in terms of empathy. I'm listening to your words and I care and I want to be able to do that but it's..."⁴

And so, what is happening here? Is the test itself imperfect? Does it ask too much of dancers? Are our words too much for one another? When we offer our real lived experience, is the best we can hope for from another a partial carry of that experience? Are others meant to understand everything about our stories, our internal architecture, our lived experience? Do we expect too much of ourselves, in our ability to respond to others?

⁴ Dejean, Krystina. Workshop February 20, 2021.

If mycelium, the great connector, collaborator, responder, supporter had consciousness, if we could ask for its reflections, how would it evaluate these questions? Would it have others?

How does Adrienne Maree Brown's observation factor in here? What about trust. What about a larger ecosystem of which we are a part. The branching networks of community, of species. What about other elements- like song and art, but also rain, the smell of green grass, the feel of bare feet on a clean wooden floor, the ritual and nourishment of clear glass of water.

Krystina's questions, and her teammates response are helpful practice. Canadians are in, for example, a new awakening to the state's ongoing colonial project and its violence, and are being continually invited into new relationship with Indigenous communities and the land. New relationship, new configurations of relationships require breakdown of the previous ones, and often also the identities and assertion of self that were previously being brought to the table. It is correct to ask: how well can I listen? Can I listen so well that I can show what the other person is telling me about their experience in my body? In how I move my body? Can I let what they are telling me change the way I move through and relate to the world? Can I let it change me?

And- maybe there are limits to modalities. All the better to become aware of how zoom can help us or get in the way; whether we want to introduce music to soften or sharpen our exchanges; and maybe to help us get clear on what we are looking for- connection, or empathy, or processing, or new interpretation and learning, or collaboration.

This is after all, an essay about technological possibility and limits in the era of the pandemic, climate and capitalist collapse. We should know what we are working with, and what we are not.

Karen Asher's work foregrounds the absurd and PLAY. In many ways, there should be a law against talking about Karen's work in this format- one person, speaking over zoom, with other people listening about work that makes the bathtub a theater. This is bananas. I should be arrested. So to just offer a bit of balance- I want Zorya to open up the white board function on zoom, and can everyone do their best doodle work, or play tic tac toe while I'm talking. Honour Petty Wap, Karen in the bathtub, Mermaid the turtle and others. Or whatever else comes to mind over the next bit.

Karen also brings in nostalgia. She draws inspiration from film, her own youth as a dancer, the sense of possibility of that time, the comparison between expectation and planning and what actually plays out, and the energy of chaos.

Its in Karen's work that I started to feel the datedness of zoom. How it felt old fashioned to use zoom nearly the moment we all adopted it, or maybe it felt like old fashioned technology in comparison to how we want it to work, or want to use it. The feeling of it being inconvenient but quaint, and somehow still useful, still needed. To serve a purpose we thought was important, but when we engage it, there is always something missing.

In this vein, it seems that perhaps all technology is outdated the moment it comes into use. Always designed to serve the time just before it materialises. A slightly old problem. Always designed with promise, until reality shows us something new about what we had hoped for, the reality of our situation, or maybe unusual opportunities for that particular invention.

We see that even the devices we think have been perfected still need work. We're moving into a time with more and more awareness of disability, for example, more understanding of all of the ways that design excludes. A knife, for example seems pretty universal until you encounter someone who can't use one, or you lose function in your hand or fingers. As children and the elderly gain more status as full humans our built environments, the technologies and our ways of relating that we thought were progressive also show their limits, and active exclusion. The invitation for chaos is active in the gap between our evolving identities and relationships and how the way we are organised, how our devices fail to serve.

But I'm stepping too far into contextualising chaos as productive/destructive, positive/negative. These parameters can be seductive, but they aren't the point in Karen's work. Can we just have some fucking fun already?

Karen's Class Montage is googly eyed pastie aerobics, school house valentines in motion, carnival funhouse clowning, vag gags, balloons and plastic masks, strap ons and piles of kisses. It is your favorite racy auntie's tickle trunk and fold out bar. Feathers, Fur, masks and mannequins. It's a space of frolic, of playing your edges to Cyndi Lauper and mirror ball disco. It is the feeling of the ultimate drug store valentine experience. All candy hearts, secret crushes out in the open, shooting your big, awkward, vulnerable, beautiful shot, watching it land, and feeling the reverberations; and ACTING OUT.

Now, I cannot listen to Karen talk about absurdity without going immediately to the French existentialists, who unfortunately come at the topic with a lot of mescaline, but no levity. In broad strokes, they insisted in various ways that life is absurd, but that the important thing is that we all have the option of choosing a way forward and of acting.

In part through his conversations with Frantz Fanon, Jean Paul Sartre theorised the practico-inert field as the foundational landscape of colonial states.⁵ In this reading, he notes that after the initiating violence and takeover by the colonial force, absolutely everything in the state reorganises around the power dynamic of coloniser and colonised; and towards the reinforcement of the colonial power. In one way of explaining this, we can think about a colonised people fighting the colonial government for rights, but in so doing, they both recognise and reinforce the legitimacy of that government. It's a trap.

Curiously, though, in my albeit limited read of his thinking on Algeria, I don't remember him circling back to the topic or the power of absurdity- defined perhaps in a different way; and the possibility of chaotic creation for stepping outside the power dynamic he believes we are condemned to live out. How does the state read, interpret, respond to blow up doll bathtub theatre, to turtles coated and licked clean of shaving foam, to pizza costume dances. Its is possible that these interruptions reveal the old fashioned, lagging technology of the colonial state; its break down, its glitched out failure to deliver on its promises.

Our relationships with the land across Canada has been shaped by our own colonial state and I wondered, thinking about Karen's bathroom shenanigans, about water. In recent years in Winnipeg, many of us have learned more about Shoal Lake 40 and its struggles towards health and justice as the community that cares for the source of our drinking water. Montreal, where Krystina practices, is on an island, and the city treats water taken from the St Lawrence, and other water bodies close by.

⁵ Critique of Dialectical Reason. Sartre, Jean Paul. Editions Gallimard. 1960

Kanesatake, a Mohawk community on one of the shores adjacent to the island has struggled enough with water quality in recent years so as to be compared with Shoal Lake 40.⁶

So- we are connected! We're connected though the state, and through its impacts, through water, through mushrooms, through technology. And we wonder. Are we doing this right? Are we caring for one another in the way that is required, needed? Are we listening and responding to what is being asked? Am I doing this right? I, specifically wonder: can I have more fun. Can I be less formulaic in my work, in my approach to the world, more organic, more creative, more fun, and maybe even more chaotic. More open to chaos. Can I be more interested in the bodies around me. The beauty of their movement.

I think that my take away from both Krystina and Karen's works are that our built technologies just can never catch up. Water and mushrooms and human relationships move too quickly. They offer too many potential pathways and options. Are too flexible, responsive, open to creation, to newness, to options, flow too freely for them to ever catch up.

⁶ Kanesatake Mohawks and Oka ponder clean water deal. Goujard, Clothild, National Observer. July 2017
<https://www.nationalobserver.com/2017/07/25/news/kanesatake-mohawks-and-oka-ponder-clean-water-deal>