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THE ARK: AN ARTISTIC, INTERDISCIPLINARY EXPERIMENT ABOUT SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

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The Ark: An Artistic, Interdisciplinary Experiment about Sustainable Communities

Synopsis:

During this presentation I will discuss my experiences as a participant in a performance art event: The Ark. The Ark is an interdisciplinary experiment bringing together academics, artists, and scientists to brainstorm about how to create sustainable communities. Based on the chakra system, the Ark includes spiritual growth and development. The Ark also explores the social impact of art.

The Ark: An Artistic, Interdisciplinary Experiment about Sustainable Communities

Margaret A. McLaren

Introduction and Background/Context:

The Ark was an interdisciplinary experiment and performance art event brought together academics, artists, and scientists to brainstorm about how to create sustainable communities. There were four teams: spiritual, academic, artistic and food. Each team brought an important element to the group in terms of creating a space from which we could create and explore how to work towards sustainable cooperative communities that supported values of creativity and cooperation. And, each member of each team was asked to contribute from their area of expertise. I was a member of the academic team. The artist who organized the event contacted me through Academia.edu after she read about my work with grassroots women's organizations in India. We exchanged email messages, and then had a Skype call and I committed to being a part of this innovative and novel (to me) project. I had never before participated in a performance art event, and did not know what to expect. I met Grace Ndiritu, the artist who created the project, and all the other participants in person for the first time on July 2 when I arrived at Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, a center for art, culture and theory, (the Labos, for short, in a suburb just outside of Paris) to begin our time participating in The Ark.

In addition to being an experimental project to create and envision sustainable communities, the Ark also explored the social impact of art, raising such questions as: Can art help to create sustainable communities? What is the social impact of art?

Here is the website's description of the The Ark:

The Ark is a post-internet living research/live art project - part scientific experiment, part spiritual experience. It is inspired by Ndiritu's own experiences during the last decade, living on and off in New Age communities. Through a multiplicity of themes including Plants, Biology, Shamanism, Meditation, Food, Philosophy, Communities, Education, Architecture, Future of Cities, Democracy and Activism. *The Ark* will aim to firstly open a dialogue between its own participants and secondly with a wider audience during the Public Weekend.

The Ark will have no audience for the first 6 days, so the participants can go deep in this process. Instead it will be closed in order to encourage creativity and vulnerability in order to come up with radical, new ways of thinking about life and the problems of today's world. All invitees will be asked to participate and share in each other's offerings whether that is a lecture, meditation session, cooking, creating a performance or Non Violent Communication (NVC) or poetry workshop. During this first moment of the

project (which was closed to the public) the public will be able to follow what is happening inside *The Ark* using Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Moreover, the ancient Indian Vedic chakra system is the conceptual and energetic foundation for the holistic nature of *The Ark* i.e. the daily spiritual workshops, academic talks and performance schedule. It is also the inspiration for the visual design of the uniforms, banners, flags and the menu of food, which the participants will consume during *The Ark*.

And the week will conclude with an extensive public program on the [Saturday 8th](#) and [Sunday 9th July 2017](#).

During the week, *The Ark* will organize its activities in four teams:

The Spiritual Team will design purification practices and energetic rituals, to elevate the consciousness of each participant individually and as a group, so that new ideas and ways of thinking about the world's problems will be produced throughout the week. This team will include [Grace Ndiritu](#) (Kenya/UK), artist and designer of *The Ark* community experiment and [Rebecca Farr](#) (USA), artist and spiritual worker who will lead all the spiritual workshops during *The Ark*.

The Food Team is inspired by *The Ark's* guidelines about growing and eating food following the chakra system which will allow the food program to be aligned with the rest of *The Ark* program of activities. *The Ark* week is a platform for seeing Food as Curative/Preventive medicine and the expansion of participant's consciousness. Thus, vegan, wild, macrobiotic, ayurvedic and raw cooking are some of the ways that food will be introduced into it. Members of this team are [Denise Palma Ferrante](#) (Australia/Italy), head chef, she will design the menu and organize the kitchen at *The Ark*, [Julian Cox](#) (UK), radical gardener, he will grow food for *The Ark* and [Sue Burge](#) (UK), sous chef and poet, she will be helping in the kitchen and leading a Food Poetry night during *The Ark*.

The Art Team will design Daily Performance workshops with all participants, which will take place throughout *The Ark* leading up to the final public performance on Sat 8 July in the streets of Aubervilliers. [Urara Tsuchiya](#) (Japan) and [Anna Tanner](#) (USA) performance artists, will be leading the performance workshops during *The Ark*. [Rafaela Lopez](#) will be in charge of the social media at *The Ark*.

The Academic Team will be leading talks and scientific experiments throughout *The Ark* week, accumulating at the Academic Roundtable on Sunday 9th July 2017 which will be moderated by Grace Ndiritu. For this, the team includes [Petra Carman](#) (Slovenia), social psychologist, will focus on social power and cults – group vs individual dynamics and facilitating community building exercises with the participants, [Gleb Vyacheslavovich](#) (Russia/Siberia), economist, will focus on BRIC and doing social testing on the subject of intercultural & interracial dialogues with participants, [Eric Heist](#) (USA), artist, will focus on the history of communities and the lineage of Biosphere scientific experiments which

took place between 1987 to 1994 in Arizona, [Kayla Anderson](#) (USA), theorist and artist, will focus on the Anthropocene, Queer & Race Theory, Inter-species relationships and Future communities, [Edgardo I. Garrido Perez](#) (Panama/Mexico), biologist, will focus on Plants and Human communities at *The Ark* and [Margaret McLaren](#) (USA), philosopher, will focus on India, Gender, Economics & Rural Communities.

The official website of *The Ark* was launched in Autumn 2017 with an archive of all materials collected during *The Ark*. It will contain texts, drawings, poems, recipes, scientific data, graphs, personal observations, diary extracts and spiritual exercises.¹

Reflections on The Ark

During our time in The Ark we were not allowed any communication with the “outside world”—no cell phones, no media no internet, no talking to any one not involved in the experiment, and no leaving the premises. We had the same routine everyday, but with a different focus: each day began with a silent breakfast, followed by a meditation or visualization practice, then an academic talk, lunch, working on our art for the public parade/protest, dinner, and an evening workshop. My responses to this routine varied from thinking it was like an amazing spiritual retreat, to feeling constrained by the strict routine, to being grateful that I could just go from one activity to another, without planning or choice. The spiritual exercises rejuvenated and challenged me, the academic talks stimulated ideas and conversation, the food inspired reverence for the earth, the chef, and our community, and the making of art fed my creative side. After 5 days of isolation and working on our costumes and masks for the protest, we took to the streets. What were we protesting? The end of the world, needless animal extinction, and our consumer culture that focuses on planned obsolescence rather than endurance, sustainability and human relationships.

The Ark: a personal essay

An intentional community. A social-psychological experiment. An oasis. Performance art. A cult. A model for a new capitalism. “A happy workplace is a productive workplace.” Or, a model for a new economy—no money, but all your needs are met. The Ark was all, and none of these.

The Ark: the end of the world. What would we take on our wooden ship? The container/ship must be built well, tight, well crafted, no holes or leaks. The crew needs to be willing to work, willing to give their time, talents and energy to save the

¹ All of the above is directly from the website that was posted prior to our performance art experiment.

animals—so many animals. Extinction—one by one, or all at once. Metaphors: spaceship earth, or lifeboat ethics.

Spaceship earth: we all share one world, the planet, with limited resources and interdependent ecosystems, economic, and social systems. From a spaceship the earth looks like a blue sphere with green shapes, intense, brilliant, small. Limited resources. Animal extinction. We are doing our damage. Slowly, quickly, unevenly. Environmental racism, toxins in our food and water, pollution, waste. Greed. Corporate capitalism. Doing violence, and being violated. Global warming. Climate change.

Lifeboat ethics: we have limited resources, only some of us can survive. We are in competition for these scarce resources. We judge each other, evaluate, criticize, and decide who should be thrown off (to drown).

Lifeboat ethics: If I am to survive, others must drown. Spaceship earth: I drown; you drown.

Let's build an ark together.

RISE UP! RESIST! EXIST!

Each animal, each human, each organism is a vital part of our ecosystem; itself a complex organism, intricate, evolving.

EVOLUTION! REVOLUTION! SURVIVE! THRIVE! BREATHE, BREED. DISTINCTION, NOT EXTINCTION.

We live in the Anthropocene—leaving aside questions about when it started—its undeniable that we live in a “new geological epoch defined by visible and lasting effects of humans on the earth/ecosystem.” Yes, and what now? We cannot reverse time. But we can explore multiple worldviews, different ways of living, ways of living more harmonious with the planet. And, develop relationships more harmonious with each other as well. Earth, ecosystem, land, plants, animals, humans, connected, interdependent. Our survival depends on...us; seeing the interdependence of everything, a cosmivision.

Indigenous thought/lifeways/philosophies/practices can point the way for a different, healthier, more harmonious way of life that acknowledges our connection

to the land, environment, all beings. We need to create, to generate new ideas of: dependence-interdependence; freedom-restriction; individual-community.

If I had to sum up what The Ark was in one sentence it would be: The Ark was An Artistic, Interdisciplinary Experiment about Sustainable Communities. But it was so much more; it was about spiritual work, heart-connections, nourishing the body and soul, political activism, the political and social impact of art. How to think about pressing problems of the world in a different way from multiple perspectives, and then take that distilled thinking and creating out into the community to share.

Part of The Ark felt like a spiritual retreat: doing meditations, spiritual exercises everyday in an effort to go deeper into ourselves, and into each other in order to go out and project a new vision to the world.

Here is an excerpt from my journal on Day 6 about silent breakfasts:

Being in silence together is power. Waking up, drinking coffee, just being. Being internal, reflecting. A silent retreat for one hour each day between 8-9 am.

Then spiritual work, meditation. The intensity of doing our individual hard work together for a collective purpose, a shared vision.

Sitting in the “comfy chair” with morning coffee I stretch my arms and touch prayer bags full of hopes, wishes, sorrows, disappointments, dreams. Interacting with the physical manifestations of our spiritual and emotional work is powerful; it is a “felt sense” of each of our individual stories/narratives coming together here, in this particular place, at this particular time.

The initial description of The Ark intrigued me: “*The Ark* is a post-internet living research/live art project - part scientific experiment, part spiritual experience. It is inspired by [Grace] Ndiritu's own experiences during the last decade, living on and off in New Age communities. ...it will be closed to encourage creativity and vulnerability, in order to come up with radical, new ways of thinking about life and the problems of today's world.” Based on the chakra system, The Ark provided a closed space in which to do spiritual and emotional work, while learning, teaching, and discussing some of the

significant challenges facing our planet—environmental crises, war, conflict and violence, destruction of our environment and ecosystem, one consequence of which is the extinction of animals. During our time in The Ark, we confronted difficult questions—how to think about these challenges historically, from interdisciplinary perspectives? How to overcome the nationalisms and corresponding xenophobia so prevalent in the contemporary world? How to creatively communicate these issues in a way that is publically accessible? How to model within our community the non-violent, creative and loving model of caring for the earth and caring for each other? How to create a close community willing to work for social and political change out of a group of strangers? And, how to both do internal spiritual work and political social change work simultaneously? Each of these questions opens up areas that need to be explored in order for us to work together on contemporary challenges; it is clear that exploitative economic and social relationships will only continue to destroy the earth. Did we answer all these questions in our week together? Did we change the world?

In the academic panel on Ecology and Capitalism, Eric raised the question of the purpose of intentional communities: What is the function of intentional communities? Is it mainly for the members? Or does it have an impact on the larger world? Can they serve as a model for other intentional, sustainable communities?

We have no choice, I think. We must go forward towards an intentional, sustainable future together, or continue to destroy the social, cultural, environmental fabric of life that supports our very existence. The challenge is how to do it. How do we address problems of poverty, racism, and economic inequality, the rise of right wing nationalism?

Bringing our message to the public had two very different parts: on Saturday a parade/protest about saving the animals, then a party, dinner, music, dancing, and film. The next day an academic roundtable bringing our discussion of the week together, and out into a wider audience. As animals, we brought smiles to the faces of people in the neighborhood—hug a dodo, pet an ibex. A bit of joy, or color; an interruption in the daily routine. Will it make a lasting impact on their lives? The crushing poverty, the

social marginalization? How do you politically mobilize people who scramble to make ends meet?

These complex questions remain unanswered. But we made a start, an impact, a ripple. We came together to learn, explore, to share, connect, nourish and be nourished, to engage with the difficult questions that should be on the forefront of everyone's minds: how do we go forward from here—together, peacefully, creatively to sustain our world and work towards environmental, economic, and social justice?

Representations of The Ark

While we were unable to take photos at all during the entire period of the Ark, we had an official chronicler and her images are on the website. Here are some representative images from our time in The Ark:



