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/'net-wærk/

Networks are webs, and in Joshua Tree they appear chaotic and asymmetrical, spun by black widows. Scorpions scurry nearby over scorched earth. Here in the Mojave Desert, perhaps one of the loneliest places on earth, we gather at the Institute of Mentalphysics to discuss networks and belonging. We are situated near the San Andreas fault among giant rocks that can swallow us whole.

People landscapes, past and present, compose an accretion of reference points and experiences, learned through relationship. Environmental landscapes drive learning through proximity and exposure, generating collisions and changes in brain chemistry.

We get good at what we practice and environments guide habits. Ultimately we carry our geographies with us in the form of personal histories. Intricately braided, they shape us and impact the lens through which we see the world.

Living in the Bay Area, my resident landscape is an epicenter for three-dimensional humans in a two-dimensional world. With close proximity to Silicon Valley, many in this region argue that presence is dying as we increasingly live life through a screen. Even a voice on the receiver is rare. I remember phone talk, like we did in the 90s. In her essay, "We're Breaking Up," San Francisco-based writer, Rebecca Solnit, notes: I think of that lost world, the way we lived before these new networking technologies, as having two poles: solitude and communion. The new chatter puts us somewhere in the middle, assuaging fears of being alone without risking real connection. It is a shallow between two steep zones, a safe spot between the dangers of contact with ourselves, with others.¹

In desolate Joshua Tree, we inhabit the poles Solnit references:

Solitude - the state or situation of being alone; a lonely or uninhabited place.

Communion - the sharing or exchanging of intimate thoughts and feelings, especially when the exchange is on a mental or spiritual level. How do we reach these vital poles and spend less time in the impotent middle? My background in dance and body-based performance situates my allegiance to networks IRL. I am partial to the sensory and ephemeral—live human networks, not ones with nodes and graphs.

Ten days in the desert focuses a microscope on both human and natural ecosystems. It is in this landscape that we discuss how we come together, as citizens, as members of a thing. How do we believe in something together? We also consider the spaces we inhabit, the places

where we meet, the changing cities.

These very inquiries compose my work at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, where I cultivate cohorts to gather around and seed movement building in the areas of urban futures, personal labor, ecology, economy, and place. This art center is a convener, informed by Lois Silverman's scholarship on the social work of museums. She maintains:

The greatest treasures of culture are not sculptures or specimens, but rather human relationships. Magnificent and precious, ourselves, close pairs, families, and groups belong in the worlds museums create, although living culture has quite different needs than rocks or bones. The next age is demanding change of global proportions and a nearly infinite capacity for human caring.²

The impossible recipe for facilitating networks of belonging acknowledges that these human systems are inherently unstable. Consensus is always temporary and contingent. The chemistry and the container consist of myriad variables. What are the ingredients? How do we put them all together? Developing a network is an unfixed practice, however several components remain key: a human network is dynamic and has a life cycle; those within a network have access into it and the choice to participate; a network is inhabitable, containing structures of support; and those connected have some sense of shared history, direction, meaning, or motivation.

Through structured time, a distinct gathering place, expected guests, loose rules of engagement, and a combination of learning and forgetting (or rather, softening one's beliefs), Summer Forum embodied an elegant design for one such network. Both generative time and unproductive time played a role, each valuable in teaching us to relate differently, from rigorous, focused discussions to leisurely scorpion scouting.

At Summer Forum, a network of belonging was encouraged partially by removing several fixtures of urban life: no money was exchanged during the residency, everyone had equal access, there were no assigned power roles aside from the most basic organization, meals and shelter were available, a group of people and schedule of activities guided the gathering, and residents chose how they wanted to participate.

Participation, activity, and proximity, however, do not necessarily constitute a sense of belonging. To belong is to be in a relationship containing both the experience of feeling valued, needed, and accepted, and the

perception that we somehow complement the system or environment.

Sharing sunscreen in the desert, we indicate some basic generosity and care. Floating on a swim noodle and discussing systems theory in the pool, we combine thought and play. Singing karaoke at a saloon, we let ourselves be seen, heard, and celebrated by others. Through solitude and communion we remember how to be awake in the world.

(Endnotes)

1 Rebecca Solnit, *The Encyclopedia of Trouble and Spaciousness* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2014).

2 Lois Silverman, *The Social Work of Museums* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

