

# 7 Conversations Before the End of Time

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## Re-enactments and New Dialogues, Small World Theatre, October 2017

Over the course of one week at Small World, Artist in Residence and 2017 Creative Wales Award Recipient, Fern Smith re-enacted a series of 'Dialogues on Art, Life & Spiritual Renewal'. These dialogues originally published 25 years ago in the ground-breaking book 'Conversations Before the End of Time' by American author Suzi Gablik are as relevant today as ever. These profound and intimate dialogues with artists, writers and philosophers address the central questions of the meaning and purpose of art in an age of accelerating social change, environmental crisis and spiritual uncertainty.



*Fern Smith & Suzi Gablik*

Over the past five years Fern, co-founder of Volcano Theatre has been in correspondence with the book's author, inspiring her to develop 'Emergence', a new initiative which has at its heart the role of art and

dialogue in the transition to a sustainable society. Fern's developing relationship with Gablik, now in her 80's, culminated in a recent invitation to visit her at her home in Blacksburg, Virginia.

Over two days in the Summer of 2017, Fern sat with Suzi speaking with her about her work and fascination with the 'art of dialogue'. This led to an idea, with the author's permission to 'restage' some of the original published dialogues with invited local artists whose work connects with environmental, social and spiritual ideas.

7 dialogues were re-staged over 7 days at Small World Theatre in Cardigan, Wales. This was a creative collaboration with 'the art of dialogue' at its very heart. Members of the public were invited to witness, participate in the dialogues and share their own insights and reflections.

*"How do we live at a time of decline, maybe even collapse and what role does art have?"*



*On Cambria Beach, California*

# Conversation 1: Sean Vicary

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## Creating The Space For A Miracle



*Sean Vicary*

On Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> October 2017 Sean Vicary and I attempt to create the space for a miracle - after David Plante, Suzi Gablik and her ground-breaking 25 year old book 'Conversations Before The End Of Time'. Sean and I meet that afternoon at Small World Theatre a creative hub, place of conviviality and communion for folks in Cardigan, West Wales. Sean is the first local artist to join me in my 7 conversations due to take place over the next 7 days as part of my 'Creative Wales' residency. He is a filmmaker and animator originally trained in fine art who stopped making art due to a belief that this was not a



sufficiently efficacious activity for the times he was living through. Following a stretch of being an activist-not-artist, he made the decision to combine his twin passions.

Coincidentally Gablik's book, 'Conversations Before The End Of Time' is another landmark example of combining these often split roles of activist and artist. Together Sean and I plan to re-stage one of the nineteen dialogues from Suzi's book - an interview with the writer David Plante called 'Creating The Space For A Miracle'. My partner, Phil and I have already prepared our performance space, the sunny intimate dance studio at Small World. We've laid out pencils, paper on the wall, cards on seats, crayons, books and flowers and have the kettle on in preparation. It is a clear and sunny Sunday afternoon which Sean advises me usually means small audiences at Small World. We'd put the word out on various networks but are unsure of who, if anyone, might actually attend.

Sean and I make ready by doing a simple ritual. We hold a palm-sized stone and speak of our hopes and fears for what is to come, then pick at random from a deck of image cards – mine: 'The Feast', Sean's: 'The Crossing'. We then spend five minutes or so having a practice run for our coming 'performance'. This is the entirety of our preparation. I've already pre-recorded the interviews, downloaded them onto our phones and the plan is to don headphones, listen to the words and speak along to 'the script' as far as possible in real time in front of a live audience. We hope it might work technically, might not fall apart and that our audience might understand the words from the original 25 year old Plante/Gablik interview. We are ready.

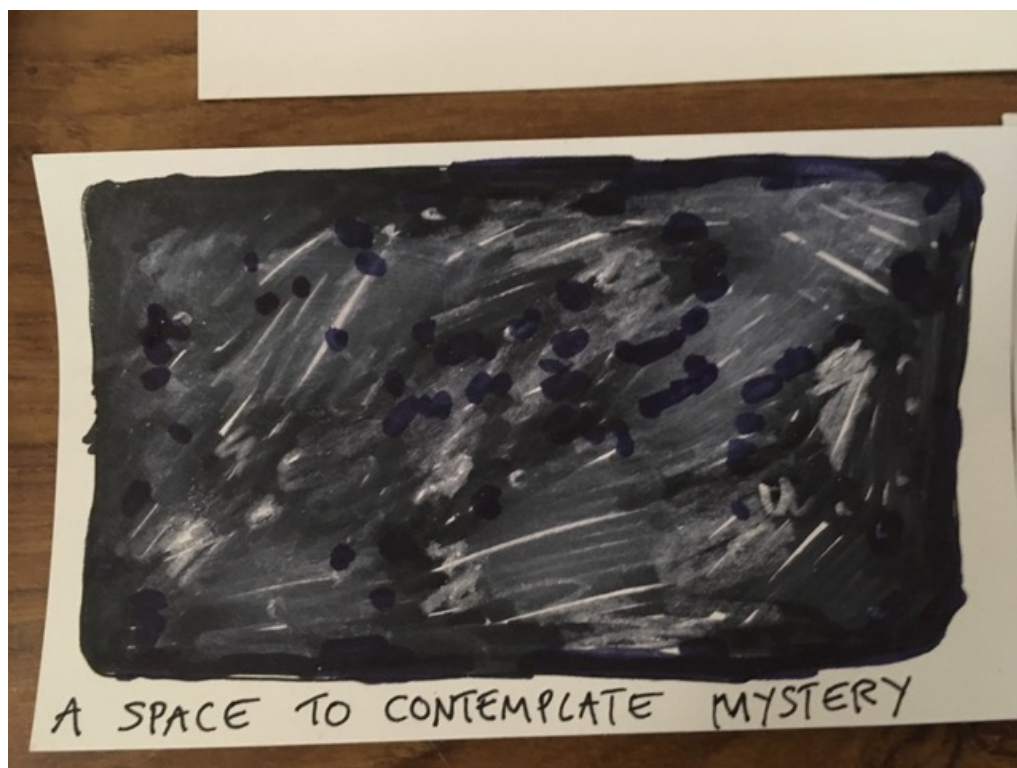
Our small audience of 12 arrives in little trickles. They get tea and get comfortable. After a context setting and introduction from myself about Small World, the project and socially engaged arts practice in general we invite the audience to have their own short dialogues by way of a warm-up. "Speak with another about a significant conversation you've had in your life – a tricky one or one you deeply enjoyed." Voices and energy begin to fill the space. We are getting relational, getting socially engaged and getting ready to 'create the space for a miracle'. Sean and I line up the sound file on our phones, press 'PLAY' simultaneously, and the interview begins with us attempting to speak along with the words we hear in our ears. Becoming accustomed initially to the strangeness of it all, we try to keep up, trying to look like we are having an actual conversation, trusting one another, and willing the whole thing to work.

Thirty minutes later we remove our headphones and let out mutual sighs of relief. We are done. We'd spoken the words – Sean playing Suzi Gablik, me playing David Plante. We'd spoken about the importance of 'Grace' over dogma and ideology, a grace that can't be manufactured or demanded but which can only arrive if the space is *created* through which it might enter. David's language and philosophy is tricky, mystical and comes from a self-confessed place of darkness. The darkness is of ultimate importance to him and it is only from the darkness that the images which have the ability to bring 'grace', miracles and transcendence of the darkness are able to come. All this from a self-confessed agnostic.

David Plante is pessimistic about the state of the world and our ability to *do* anything about it. His alternative though, does not appear to be passive acceptance. He does not trust ideologies, believing they always fall short of, or create the opposite of their professed intention to improve conditions or save the planet. David is a writer but finds more in common with visual artists. He is obsessed with creating the

image – but prefers his images constructed through *language* rather than offered in the form of pictures. He speaks about his drive to find an image as perfect as Chekhov's where a bowl of boiled potatoes falls from a table to the floor and becomes soaked in blood. For him, this is not simile, not metaphor but a transcendent image that has the ability to express the unspoken or unspeakable. As a pessimist and an agnostic, perhaps surprisingly he speaks more commonly of the mystical, not the methodological. The mystery of The Annunciation is perhaps for him the most powerful image, whereby the inconceivable literally occurs and a virgin conceives. The image has the ability to stop the world. It is not *like* a miracle, it *is* a miracle – in the same way he claims that a poem, picture or piece of music is *also* a miracle.

Plante believes in the power of art to give us a sense of possibility, perhaps to imagine the world other than it is currently. His job, he believes is to create the space in which the image, the miracle can occur. We finish with a paradox. We live in a world where the exotic and faraway places of our imagination that are pristine in our remembering, are dying or dead, like the Aral Sea (at the time of the interview in 1992). He simultaneously believes in the power of universal images such as a sunset to connect us to a deep knowing that we witness a miracle every day. And a trust in the ability of Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony to raise us to a level of awareness that transcends the individual and unites us. Space, grace, darkness and possibility. In his own words "we are inspired by miracles, not in terms of what they intend, not in terms of any dogmas or definitions or commentary they support, but in terms of an awareness of something greater than what we ourselves can do".



#### *Audience Response*

The process of performing the interview is exhausting. Sean admits he doesn't think he could have concentrated on the task for more than thirty minutes. The mental focus it takes to speak along to Suzi and David's words is immense. We both admit to finding it near impossible to speak the words and take

them in at the same time. Strange perhaps that though Sean and myself are having the conversation, we are probably the ones in the room least able to actually participate in it. In Plante's words, we 'created' the space - became the cyphers or vessels for the conversation to come through, to be brought into the room. Luckily Sean and myself have read the conversation beforehand so are at least cognizant with the content of what we have been saying.

We move on to speak about the process - about conversation, about dialogue. I ask Sean if there are any resonances with his own work in the conversation we've just performed. He talks about his recent work (Sean is also a 2017 Creative Wales recipient) on plant life and especially lichens as having an ability to provide us with 'early warning signals' of ecological degradation. He speaks of his connection to *Genii Loci* - spirit or sense of place. His work is painstakingly slow, meticulous and is almost akin to ritual and dance. ['The Nose'](#), an exquisitely beautiful animated film commissioned by The Wellcome Trust lasting 5 minutes, took him 6 months to make. Rather than make, I would say 'to build', as he constructs the film frame by frame in partnership with plants and the living world not using CGI which he acknowledges would take a fraction of the time. We speak about 'slow art' as well as the tyranny of the most frequently asked question to artists "what are you doing next?" Such a question immediately plunges the artist and inquirer out of the present and headlong into an imagined future. One of our guests at Small World suggests that the repeated movements needed to build each frame are similar to the spiritual practice of 'prostration'. Sean agrees, seeing the expenditure of his energy not as some kind of self-inflicted punishment but akin to a ritualized daily practice.

We go on to speak about Plante's insistence that there must be 'space' around the image. I suggest to Sean that this is something I see in his films. I believe his work gives an experience of what the eco-psychologist Joana Macy's calls 'deep time' as well as 'deep space'. I mention I've had a feeling of being in a 'state of grace' watching 'The Nose', on a number of occasions. Sean admits to feeling a little uncomfortable with the word 'grace' which for him has personal associations of punishment rather than permission. Others in our small audience confess to sitting more easily with the word. This leads us to a further enquiry. How can we have *conversations* with others, especially if we are not comfortable or don't agree with what they say? How can we *dialogue* with those whose words we cannot understand or even tolerate? How can we relate to one another through or beneath the words, enabling the possibility of connection and communion rather than dislocation and competition? How can our conversations enable us to see one another rather than make us more separate?

In the spaces 'in between' our performed dialogue, we invite our audiences, guests, witnesses, spectators to have their own conversations. We ask: "Can we cultivate the ability to speak and listen with awareness? Are we able to hear not only that which we agree, but listen for differences of opinion, develop the capacity of empathic listening and even perhaps cultivate a kind of deep or quantum listening?" Sean speaks about his understanding of the notion of 'entanglement' in physics whereby two particles are separated from one another but which are eternally connected in time and space. Entanglement is a day-to-day reality, though we cannot see it. We live in an entangled, messy, interconnected and interdependent universe. In reference to me performing the words of the still-living writer David Plante, and Sean Vicary performing the words of the still-living Suzi Gablik, someone in our gathering observed: "their ears must be burning now".

And tomorrow, the artist Debbie Rees and I perform 'Viewing The World As Process' a conversation from April 6<sup>th</sup> 1993 between Suzi Gablik and author of 'The Death of Nature' Carolyn Merchant.

**Listen to the recording of the interview here.**

<https://soundcloud.com/user-443414496/conversations-before-the-end-of-time-sean-vicary>

## Conversation 2: Debbie Rees

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### Viewing The World As Process

On April 6<sup>th</sup> 1993, Suzi Gablik sat down with Carolyn Merchant author of 'The Death Of Nature' to have a conversation about her work. In 1995, the transcript of this conversation is published along with 18 others with leading artists, scholars and activists in a book entitled: 'Conversations Before The End Of Time'. On October 9<sup>th</sup> 2017, Fern Smith sits down with artist and grower Debbie Rees of '[Vegetable Agenda](#)' ('where art and vegetables meet') to have a conversation about her work. As part of this process Debbie and I 'perform' the transcript of Gablik and Merchant's dialogue. As I write this, I am reminded that "reduce, reuse, recycle," is one of the original mantras of the ecological movement. Perhaps my residency at Cardigan's Small World Theatre should be called 'In Praise Of Recycled Art'. In homage to Ms Gablik, who was at the cutting edge of the art as activism campaign when she published her book in 1995, my residency is instead called: '7 Conversations Before The End Of Time'.

This is a book whose raison d'être is to articulate that artists have a pro-active role to play in halting the process of ecological degradation and creating new, more democratic, socially and environmentally responsible structures, and processes. Gablik believes that art has the capability to reflect, support and lead change in the world. From my own experience, I believe along with Suzi that art can help us collectively imagine a different kind of future and the power behind this imagining, has the potential to bring it into being.

Debbie Rees is part of a collective called Rhys Reece Rees and with her partner Julian runs a permaculture market garden in Pembrokeshire which regularly hosts Artists in Residence and 'Art WOOFERS' (Workers on Organic Farms). Debbie and Julian arrive at Small World with armfuls of material – a POLLING BOOTH and voting slips so people can vote for their BASIC HUMAN NEEDS (Participation, Idleness, Creativity, Affection, Freedom, Understanding, Protection and Subsistence). "What needs are you most lacking in your life currently?" They have been touring with the booth to many urban communities and are making a detailed, area-by-area, qualitative analysis of their findings. Their research is creative and empirical at the same time. They distribute empty seed packets marked 'Basic Human Needs Seeds' and a tray of what



they refer to as 'Running Beans'. "Split your own shells, fill the packets with dried beans and grow them yourself or give them to a friend". There is also the Basic Human Needs Donor Card marked FREEDOM with accompanying instructions. "Attach this card to the surface of your Credit Car to achieve freedom from Indebtedness". Or you might choose to take home the UNPA MEMBERSHIP CARD and be part of the United Neo-Peasant Artist collective. "You activate your membership by drawing a little picture of



*Debbie Rees*

yourself in the box provided". At the heart of Debbie's work is humour, participation and also a serious agenda grounded in ethics and politics.

Debbie tells me that she used to be a fine artist. She originally trained as a sculptor then stopped making art and became a grower. She began to feel that she needed to begin making art again, in part to balance her life. She did not return to her old form but instead became an advocate of 'useful art' and 'art as



participatory process'. She acknowledges one her favourite artist is Joseph Beuys, artist, activist, icon and founder of the German Green Party who popularized the slogan 'Everybody is an Artist'. Debbie and I share this as one of the inspirations behind our own respective art practices.

This 2<sup>nd</sup> 'Conversation Before The End Of Time' takes place in the cosy kitchen at Small World Theatre. There's a yoga class happening next door in the dance studio otherwise we'd have been there. Instead we take the opportunity to experiment with presenting 'kitchen-table theatre'. Before we begin the performance of our conversation, we invite our small audience to have their own paired dialogues: "name a being – human or otherwise - alive, dead or mythical, you would most like to have a conversation with and why?" The kitchen becomes populated with beings from the past, present and future to which we dedicate the evening's proceedings, alongside of course the very much alive Suzi Gablik and Carolyn Merchant.



*Debbie Rees & Fern Smith*

Debbie and I cue up the conversation we are due to perform, insert our headphones, and with a "3,2,1 PLAY," we are off! We speak along to what we hear in real time. The rule is that we repeat the 'script' as if we are in live conversation with one another. Debbie 'plays' Suzi, I 'play' Carolyn. At the same time we are very much ourselves. The conversation is arresting, swift and brilliant. It is a roller-coaster. The words come thick and fast, sometimes we are simultaneous with, sometimes we lag behind the script. It's a tense but exciting process where anything can happen. Carolyn speaks about industrial capitalism since the 17<sup>th</sup> century and its agenda whereby "nature gets transformed from independent subject into object

and is used to advance the interests of entrepreneurs and elites at the expense of fulfilling basic needs for everyone, especially the poor.” This is the starting point from which Suzi and Carolyn embark. We hear about the rise of empiricism and the scientific view of the world, whereby experiment and mathematics become the principle form of knowledge, with ‘objective’ science splitting from ethics. Suzi offers her view that a parallel process happened in the art world talking about a split between the *making* of an object and its *context* or *function* – seeing art as commodity, an abstraction, a fetish – popularly becoming known as ‘art for art’s sake’. Meantime extractive global capitalism with its accompanying mindset begins to undermine its own resource base. This conversation was back in 1992, when George W. Bush had just failed to win the presidential election and to Gablik and Merchant’s surprise, Bill Clinton got in. Nevertheless they speak of an undermining of much of the U.S’ green programme (not for the last time) in terms of mining, grazing and forestry.

Carolyn however appears confident that the ‘Ecological Revolution’ which she believes will take several decades to realise will force Western Market Capitalism to become more sustainable and ecologically viable. She does not believe in an exponential ‘growth-and-collapse’ scenario but more in an emergent ‘order-out-of-chaos’ approach. Her justification and hope for this lies in the work of proponents of the new science – of complexity and chaos theory including the work of David Bohm, Ilya Prigogine and others who view the world as ‘process’ rather than a Newtonian picture of “manipulable parts rearranged through external forces”. Chillingly we hear Merchant say it is *possible* but not necessarily *probable* that we can turn things round. Later in the dialogue Suzi asks if we need to re-skill ourselves in wilderness survival in preparation for not being able to turn things around. Merchant resists the idea of total societal and planetary collapse, “I don’t see that kind of collapse happening, because I think we’re a lot smarter than to just let it happen.” These words are remembered by many of us as the night comes to a close – almost as some kind of empty joke. Suzi asks: “what is the role of art in all this?” Both agree that the kind of art which might be meaningful at this time is one which is not just a “spectator sport” but one which is participatory and encourages different ways of knowing and being-in-the-world. They site inspiring examples of art which see the world as “a giant conversation in which everybody is involved, not only people, but trees and rocks and landscapes and rivers”.

Debbie and I come to the end of our conversation. The kitchen is a few degrees hotter than when we started half an hour ago. We mistakenly left the tea-urn on throughout our dialogue and we now find ourselves literally all steamed up and experiencing global-kitchen-warming. We open the door and let the kitchen (and us) cool down. A simple feedback loop – we notice the issue, propose a solution and act quickly, vowing to learn from our oversight next time. We know now that things are not that simple, climate chaos and ecological collapse are complex issues involving a multitude of processes. We need a new way of thinking and being – a new science, a new kind of art if we are to have any chance of addressing the same issues raised in Gablik and Merchant’s 1993 conversation. They were saying that 25 years ago. We are saying the same thing now. On an early October evening, we are gathered here in Small World Theatre on the banks of the Teifi River - a small learning and conversational community. Those beings - human and other than human that we dedicated our evening to as we began our conversation are all gathered in the room with us now. The feeling is palpable. “My ancestors,” “the house I grew up in,” “a great root-ball from an ancient tree”, “an archetypal dictator,” and “Gaia,” are here with us. We need to all be part of this great conversation – the past, present and future beings - human and other

than human. We need to, as Gablik and Merchant said a quarter of a century ago, find new ways of being, doing and knowing. This is one conversation before the end of time that needs to be continued...

## Listen to the recording of the interview here.

<https://soundcloud.com/emergence-6/conversations-before-the-end-of-time-debbie-rees>

# Conversation 3: Jess Allen

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## Adrift On The Fickle Seas Of The Art World

‘This devil’s dance is dedicated to Fern and Laurie’ writes Suzi Gablik in the opening pages of her 1995 publication: ‘Conversations Before The End Of Time’ – nineteen dialogues with leading artists and thinkers on the subject of art, life and spiritual renewal. The Fern in question, is artist and life-long friend of Suzi’s, Fern Schaffer, the Laurie, is Laurie Zuckerman, another artist, friend and the subject of Gablik’s penultimate conversation: ‘Adrift On The Fickle Seas Of The Art World’.

Artist, aerialist and academic, Jess Allen who is currently completing a practice-based doctorate on ‘Tracktivism’ joins me at Small World Theatre to perform this, the third of my seven conversations. It is unique in the collection since Zuckerman turns the conversational tables on Gablik and her ideas for the first time come under the scrutiny of her interviewee. Perhaps scrutiny is too strong a word but Zuckerman clearly has some questions she needs answers to. Most significantly, concerning Gablik’s own personal views on what kind of art is needed at a time of social and ecological crisis. This conversation manages to deal with the dilemmas at the heart of Gablik and Zuckerman’s practices, whilst at the same time, feeling very candid and ‘off the record’. Zuckerman, after reading Gablik’s call to arms: ‘The Re-enchantment Of Art,’ no longer feels able to continue as a practicing artist. She dearly wants to be a “purveyor of beauty”, but now feels this is too frivolous a motive to create, given the state of the world and the activism of other more socially engaged artists. She speaks of her growing lack of confidence in her ability to create beauty and a fear that should she continue with the work she wished to make, she would just be cluttering the world with more useless ‘stuff’. She is an artist who feels forced to re-evaluate her practice in order to be of service, but has little idea of what her next steps should be.

Artists might well feel placed in the dock, in response to Gablik’s clarion cry to ‘make art as if the world matters’. Gablik denies she has a fixed position, and reveals that she personally has been stopped in her tracks by the actions of two artist acquaintances: Rachel Dutton and Rob Olds (also interviewed in the



book) who claim that art has no role during this time of social and ecological collapse. Dutton and Olds are propelled by a belief that they need to STOP making art as an act of service to life on Earth. They suggest instead, an artful daily practice where everything is done with a kind of prayerful awareness. The actions of these two artists have impacted deeply not just on Suzi, but many of the artists in the book - as well as many readers of it. Their decision has been applauded by some and strongly rejected by others. Suzi herself goes through a period of yet another re-evaluation of her own position after meeting these two maverick artists. 'Conversations Before The End Of Time,' is Gablik's own highly individual response to the challenge they pose. The book is a powerful statement of intent, designed to seek out, question, and converse with leading critics, psychologists and spiritual teachers who might have something of worth to share on the matter. Zuckerman is not only an artist, but a personal friend, who initially appears to be witnessing Gablik's project from the sidelines but then is propelled into the fray. She represents the many traditional artists who have had to entirely re-evaluate their life and work as a consequence of Gablik's continued questioning. In a way Zuckerman is asking her questions on behalf of us all.



*Audience Member Response*

Jess Allen speaks the words of Suzi Gablik, I speak the words of Laurie Zuckerman. This is my third 'Conversation Before The End Of Time' at Small World Theatre. Zuckerman is the third artist I've played in three consecutive days. After our 'performance,' there is much to discuss in terms of the content of this particular conversation and many of us present resonate with, or are triggered by a number of the themes raised. The conversation lays bare the dilemma that Gablik is discussing at the heart of both this book and her earlier, 'The Re-enchantment Of Art'. How can artists continue to create work without regard for the social and ecological context in which they are working? Gablik is heralding the death knell of the neutral 'art for arts sake' position, as well as the end of the great modernist project championed by her younger self – the artist collagist who moved from New York to London to be part of a giddy golden

circle of successful artists. Zuckerman's own grief at losing her practice and identity, chimes with the sadness previously articulated by Gablik, having herself, gone through a particularly heart-breaking divorce from her former great love of modernism. In response to this personal crisis, Gablik was one of the first to articulate a new kind of art and new role for artists, as *witness* to the demise of nature and *activist* in defense of it. For this she has been in turns dismissed, vilified, publicly lambasted and side-lined by the mainstream art world.



Jess Allen

There is a tenderness, uncertainty and fragility at the heart of this particular conversation. It is personal rather than scholarly, though it robustly discusses questions of aesthetics, dialogic practice and the tyranny of professionalism with its resultant impact on the values of our culture. Jess's delivery of Gablik's words is gentle. My delivery of Zuckerman's words feels like a plea for things to return to a semblance of normalcy where artists can just return to their studios and spend their time behind closed doors making beautiful things. Zuckerman knows in her bones that this is no longer an option, hence her dogged interrogation. Suzi Gablik, Jess Allen, Laurie Zuckerman and myself concur that the world still needs beauty - perhaps now more than ever before. In Gablik's words: "we need to put beauty back into the world, big time. Everything we are surrounded by should be beautiful, soul-enhancing and deeply nourishing to us." But this is not just about artists making beautiful things and filling art galleries with

them, though Gablik is not against the art object per-se. Instead Gablik champions a new way of doing and making, whereby a conversation, action or process, not just an object, can be a beautiful thing. As an example, Gablik talks about the work of artist Mierle Ukeles, who shook hands with every sanitation worker in New York in the early 90's, as one such beautiful thing. She defends this work against critics who dismiss Ukeles act as "not art" but merely an example of community service. When we reach out to others, "some form of beauty is created, some form of good karma is being brought into the world". This act could be performed by the artist themselves but is perhaps even more powerful, when the artist becomes a host, catalyst or facilitator for the creativity and expression of others' activity in service of life on earth. Gablik and Zuckerman appear to describe a process where the artist increasingly makes themselves redundant as they dedicate themselves to enabling each and every one of us to fulfill our deep and collective creativity as human beings. 'Freedom of expression,' is not the aim of the artist, but to midwife a new aesthetics that has the ability to enable us to learn how to live in collaboration with one another and the planet.

Jess Allen's work is perhaps in this domain: acts of beauty; tracktivism; conversations about water; local food-production and climate change. She walks different landscapes and paths, making herself available, placing herself in different communities. Jess' work is activism where she literally walks her talk. Her conversational or 'dialogic practice' and her walking-as-art-and-activism present us with a different and more approachable picture of an activist. Jess' work invites us all to see the world differently, to have conversations about it, to become artful in our living and activist in our outlook. She invites us to become 'tracktivists', gentle activists, trackers, slow artists and purveyors of beautiful acts. Simultaneously she appears to be identifying a different position and practice as an academic, with many similarities to Gablik's own campaign from 25 years before.

The ensuing conversation with our guests, witnesses, audience, a number of whom have attended every conversation so far, ranges from the gaping chasm between the world of the academy and the real world to the principle of "the unhewn log." Alluding to the preponderance of nouns in the Gablik/Zuckerman conversation and a notion that the world we inhabit is itself shaped and constructed by the language we use to describe it, one witness comments that if we call ourselves "artists and activists", this creates a whole category of people who are NOT artists and activists. How can we use language not to separate us from one another and the earth but to bring a new world into being? Are we able to tolerate a multitude of perspectives and not judge another for not sharing our opinion? The act of literally channeling the words of Gablik and Zuckerman reminds us that we humans have the ability to put ourselves 'into the position of,' not 'in opposition,' to one another. One guest, after witnessing the process for the third time in three days, passionately exclaims: "what is it you are *doing*?" Perhaps this is what these 'Conversations Before The End Of Time' are doing. Some uncanny process of unfixing fixed identities, offering ambivalent possibilities, sharing discourse over space and time. There is something magical at work here that none of us can quite understand or articulate. Beneath the content of the conversation there is a palpable sense of the fragility of our fixed identities and positions, a collective but not common consciousness, a sense of the potential of becoming a geo-physical force for good. Perhaps we are no longer adrift on the fickle seas of the art world but immersed instead in a multitudinous sea of possibilities?



**Listen to the recording of the interview here.**

<https://soundcloud.com/emergence-6/conversations-before-the-end-of-time-jess-allen>

## **Conversation 4: Avi Allen**

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### **Making Art About Centipedes**



*Avi Allen*

It is Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> October, a sunny morning at Small World Theatre. I am preparing lentil soup and waiting for the arrival of artist and curator of Capel y Graig, Avi Allen. We are having a midday 'Conversation Before The End Of Time' in Small World's kitchen, hence the offering of bread and soup to our anticipated guests. We have no idea of numbers as this is our first noontime offering. In the end, the

little kitchen is full to bursting with our lunchtime arrivals. Avi brings with her a small library of books including Gregory Bateson's 'Steps Toward An Ecology Of Mind' and 'Thinking Like A Planet' by J. Baird. Callicott. Avi is custodian and curator of the beautiful Capel Y Graig, a non-conformist chapel she sensitively renovated with her father in Furnace, Mid Wales. She hosts intimate performance events and invites anyone who will, to browse the Capel Llyfrgell/Library and have a cup of tea. The Capel is non-conformist and so is Avi, in a way that is both sensitive and precise. She is attuned to the voices of the other-than-human in the form of spaces, plants and animals. This is demonstrated in the way she works *with* the Capel to programme events. She does not impose her curatorial decisions *upon* it. This is a subtle but important difference.

As an arts student, Avi was introduced to Contextual Studies which ignited her passion and gave her a lens through which to view the world. It also helped her make sense of her own developing practice. After leaving college she herself became a lecturer in Contextual Studies at Carmarthen Art College. However, working within the environment of a traditional institution did not suit her as her ideas ran in opposition to hierarchical institutions and traditional teaching structures and still are. Hence her decision instead to renovate a chapel in order to curate an art space to support research and learning in a more accessible, democratic fashion. Avi is the only of my 7 artists joining me this week who encountered the work of Suzi Gablik whilst still a student. Since then she has been a fellow traveler and champion of my Suzi project and has supported me every step of the way. When I met Suzi Gablik at her home in Virginia earlier this year, Avi gave me a message to give to her:

*Dear Suzi*

*"...finches can't make atom bombs, right?..."*

*That's true. But we don't make formic acid as ants do..."*

*These were radical thought shifting ideas and words for me...thank you Suzi and Christopher Manes, for having and sharing this conversation with us all.*

*These words have been inspirational and pivotal for my ongoing development as an artist, a curator and a participant in the world...to move beyond the 'Enlightenment Story' – the vertical, hierarchical and domineering man (male) centred story to a more horizontal...moving through, and always in relation with the world...to make art about centipedes...to make art with the centipede...to listen to and learn from the centipede...to curate as a centipede!*

In this message, Avi was alluding to the conversation between Gablik and Manes: 'Making Art About Centipedes,' her favourite in the book 'Conversations Before The End Of Time'. When I invited Avi to be part of my residential experiment at Small World she immediately agreed but on one condition, that she could choose the interview herself - and it would be all about Centipedes. Given the title of this particular dialogue, you could be forgiven for mistakenly thinking that this one is a little frivolous. On the contrary, though Gablik and Manes are clearly having a ball talking to one another, the content is about as serious as it could be. Author of the books 'Green Rage: Radical Environmentalism And The Unmaking Of

Civilization’ in 1990 and ‘Rediscovering The Spirituality Of Animals’ in 1997. Manes says: “I really think it’s time for our culture, and artists to change the subject. For the last five hundred years, all we’ve talked about is Man – his political existence, his economic existence, his psychological existence...I think we have to take the subject and just put it aside, not talk about it anymore. We need to start talking about this other kingdom.” This other kingdom Manes refers to is nature, which has been apportioned a minor, peripheral role in the grand story of Man since the Renaissance, appearing either as an “immense silence,” or as a “universe of not saids.” In this fictional story, which is the principle one we have privileged, only Man has a voice, and without Man, the world is bereft of aim of purpose.

It is this privileging that Avi resists with all her formidable energy. Her work is informed by a practice of listening to the voice of ‘the other.’ Allen’s and Manes’ key question regarding the story our civilisation has created in order to understand the world is “who is speaking?” This is what she resonated with in her first Contextual Studies class at art college and this is what has shaped her pre-occupations ever since. From the get-go, this study brought her face-to-face with issues of Gender and the notion that the art world is not value-free. We find that a certain kind of voice and a certain kind of gaze or knowledge is privileged. It turns women as well as nature into “not-said,” and turns both into objects in the process. Avi champions ‘The Re-enchantment Of Art’ and ‘Conversations Before The End Of Time,’ for bringing not just gender but the environment to the heart of the discourse about art. Its narrative since the Enlightenment not only ‘normalises’ but ‘neutralises’ the gaze of Man, and the actions of extractive Capitalism justified by ideas from the mechanistic scientific revolution of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Both Gablik, Manes and Allen find hope in notions of Deep Ecology and getting back into communication with the other biological communities, where man does not exactly become superfluous but is instead, “a plain member of the biological community. We’re here like anything else.” Manes finds this “greatly liberating” since “we don’t have to be the vanguard of evolution anymore.”

There’s something about this “kitchen conversation” which deeply energises our guests. Perhaps it is the informality, perhaps it is the free soup, perhaps it is Avi’s sheer joy in channelling Gablik as well as the impeccable logic of Mane’s refusal to privilege Man over termites, banana slugs or fungi! Our packed kitchen is vibrating with questions and conversation as Avi Allen and myself finish our performance and remove our headphones. It could have gone on longer. There is always more to say, to share. The dialogue leaves us with a challenge that we all take home with us. In Manes’ words, again: “Power privileges and reifies its story, so it is not even a story to most people. The domination of humanity over nature is a fact to them. There is no other story to be told.” But, he tells us it is the role of intellectuals, writers and artists to start telling other stories. On a small scale this is exactly what we are doing here today.

## **Listen to the recording of the interview here.**

<https://soundcloud.com/emergence-6/conversations-before-the-end-of-time-avi-allen>



# Conversation 5: Simon Whitehead

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## What Is Art For?

‘What is art for?’ This is the question whose response eventually becomes the book of nineteen dialogues on art, life and spiritual renewal published in 1995: ‘Conversations Before The End Of Time’. Suzi Gablik, the author was an artist and collagist in the years preceding its appearance. The work of psychologist Arnold Mindell on ‘deep democracy’ and the book ‘We’ve Had A Hundred Years Of Psychotherapy And The World Is Getting Worse’ by Michael Ventura and James Hillman are the catalysts for a new departure in Gablik’s work. She’d published a number of books before ‘Conversations’ but this is the first to be written not with a single authorial voice but as an act of collaboration.



*Simon Whitehead*

In last night’s conversation: ‘What Is Art For?’ at Small World Theatre, the 5<sup>th</sup> of ‘7 Conversations Before The End Of Time’ performed with the movement artist Simon Whitehead, we find out what was so inspiring for Suzi about encountering deep democracy and deep dialogue. And how they helped her arrive

at the subject matter and methodology for this extraordinary book on “art in an age of accelerating social change and spiritual uncertainty.” Gablik talks about Ventura and Hillman’s own book, written completely in the form of a dialogue as being like two jazz musicians riffing off each other. Deep dialogue is different from a traditional interview where an assumed expert: “presumably the interesting one” is interviewed by somebody else (presumably the less interesting one). With Ventura and Hillman’s dialogue, sometimes one voice comes to the fore, sometimes both merge as one. Suzi tells us she is as excited by this form as she was when she came across collage for the first time. She is equally taken with Mindell’s work on ‘Deep Democracy’ which she tells us has the ability to bring a multitude of voices into a discussion, with no one voice dominating and wiping all the others out. ‘Conversations’ becomes Suzi’s own experiment in response to and riffing off the work of this trinity of Mindell, Ventura and Hillman.

This particular conversation with writer Ellen Dissanayake in which the idea for Gablik’s book appears to be seeded becomes the first printed transcript of a project which takes her three years from first conversation to publication. ‘What Is Art For?’ is uniquely significant and represents a kind of touchstone for the entire book. I’ve asked Simon Whitehead to perform this conversation with me as I feel some of its pre-occupations resonate with his own work. Simon is a Movement Artist who started out as a Geographer. He moved away from the dance studio and went walking, to be more relational in his practice and to: “internalise a sense of place, to understand its musicality, its beat.” He moved further from traditional movement practice in his desire to spend time outside the traditional art institutions and the art market. He is emotionally and geopolitically committed to dialogue, to place, to people. Much of his work now takes place in and around the village of Abercych, where Simon lives with his family in rural West Wales. He wanted to know what he could do, or make in his own village, to bring his ideas ‘home’ and to feel a sense of belonging.

I imagine Simon like Dissanayake has often asked himself and others, ‘What Is Art For?’ In this evening’s ‘Conversation Before The End Of Time,’ Dissanayake tells us that art is a biological imperative for humans, hence the name of her 1992 book ‘Homo Aestheticus.’ She elucidates her idea that art is about “making special.” She believes the activity of making special had a significant function in early communities in terms of creating a sense of belonging. They discuss the notion that art today (when they were speaking 25 years ago) is less of a manifestation of belonging to the tribe but, being more concerned with the self-expression of the artist, is often an indication of their independence *from* it. Gablik paraphrases Hillman announcing, “we’ve had a hundred years of modern art and the world’s getting worse, maybe we need to look at that.” The conversation continues, with the idea that man is a maladaptive species who has created a dysfunctional world in which even he can no longer live.

In the conversation, Gablik shares Dissanayake’s scholarly curiosity but appears to want to go deeper. A point alluded to by Dissanayake when she says, “I don’t know whether this project between you and me will really go anywhere – whether we’re enough on the same wavelength or not.” In response, Gablik returns to Ventura and Hillman’s book, quoting from it at length on a couple of occasions.

*James Hillman: ...and how do we go through the rituals of the dying of the culture?*

*Michael Ventura: You can't negotiate with an avalanche. Nothing, nothing, nothing is going to stop this shipwreck of this civilization...But accepting the story, accepting this civilization is ending, doesn't mean you don't fight for what you believe. You take part in the story. You do the portion of the story that is given to you...*

The performance of this conversation with Simon Whitehead leaves us both breathless and a little hysterical. It is our technical challenge to simultaneously listen to and speak the words we hear through our headphones giving the appearance that he and I are actually having the GAblik/Dissanayake conversation in present time. The conversation lasts for 30 minutes and is a feat of concentration and focus. Once we press 'PLAY' on our devices in order to successfully recreate the conversation so it makes sense to our audience, we need to speak without ceasing to an internally dictated rhythm. After we finish, Simon admits to looking at the timer after three minutes and wondering if he was going to make it. During the original conversation and our performance of it 25 years later, I feel the presence and pressure of time. It is as if Simon and myself are in the shadow of Ventura's avalanche and there is definitely no negotiation.

Simon who has two young daughters admits to not wanting to listen to the conversation more than he needed to in his preparation for this evening. He read the interview, listened to the recording I sent out and wanted to "see what happened" without over-preparation and practice. In truth, there is not much preparation that is really useful in this process. I can't help connecting our re-playing of this conversation - which at times feels it might technically fall apart - with the content we are talking about. Ventura says: "our culture is over." Dissanayake responds, "It really does seem hopeless, I agree with you." GAblik says that instead of finding it hopeless she finds it liberating and this hopelessness has the ability of taking her more deeply into life. She is given permission to feel the pain and not have to smother it. In the final words of their conversation, GAblik names the strength to be found through acceptance, which she states "isn't the same as resignation."

At the end of our performance, Simon, I and our entire audience at Small World are left a little breathless and quite speechless. There is so much to say on the subject of 'What is Art For?' Some of us speak of the necessity to live with the grief of knowing that our planetary situation just might be hopeless. "How can we live with this and still plant trees today?" "You take part in the story." "How do we live through the ritual of a dying culture?" What is art for – especially during this time when humans are the first species who have the ability to choose whether or not to go extinct? Simon is reminded of an interview that the composer Brian Eno gave when asked what his own music does, responded that it created a "field of surrender." I paraphrase Suzi and say that surrender is not the same as resignation. There is a tenderness, a silence and a tiredness in the air at Small World Theatre as we approach 10pm and the end of our 5th 'Conversation Before The End Of Time.' There is also a growing small community that has formed throughout the week. Some of us have returned on numerous occasions, one has attended all five conversations and promises to be with us until the end. What is art for? We all ask ourselves this question before we depart. We have many responses, and as Mindell would say "not one answer dominating and wiping all the others out." Here are a few of them:

"It is about the creation of an offering;"



“It makes us more mindful;”

“Art can’t change the world but it can change us;”

“Art creates relationship;”

“Art has the ability to bind us;”

“Art can do everything and nothing.”

We say our goodbyes. My partner, Phil and I accompanied by our patiently impatient dogs Betty and Jaffa, slowly clear the room, collect up the notes and responses left by our audience, put the chairs away, do the washing up, turn the lights off and know that we will be returning the same time tomorrow for another ‘Conversation Before The End Of Time’.

**Listen to the recording of the interview here.**

<https://soundcloud.com/emergence-6/conversations-before-the-end-of-time-simon-whitehead>

## Conversation 6: Ruth Jones

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### The Liminal Zones Of Soul

Ruth Jones, one of the founders of Holy Hiatus, joins me for my penultimate conversation at Small World Theatre: ‘The Liminal Zones Of Soul.’ Originally conducted on Friday November 12<sup>th</sup> 1993 between Suzi Gablik and Thomas Moore, we ‘re-play’ it on Saturday October 14<sup>th</sup> 2017 with Ruth Jones playing Gablik and me playing Moore. At just shy of 35 minutes, this is the longest re-created conversation so far of my Small World residency, inspired by Gablik’s ground-breaking 1995 book ‘Conversations Before The End Of Time.’ I love this dialogue, as I have loved the previous five. It was hard to choose only 7 conversations to re-create from the 19 in the book. Ruth is an artist and one of the founders of [Holy Hiatus](#). Her work is about ritual, community and place and she is currently editing two films about a local community project she initiated mixing professional dancers with members of the West Wales community. She edited the film, mixing footage of dancers in the landscape and close-up footage of its other-than-human populations, with the intention of showing the dance as “just something that is happening – nothing

special or out of the ordinary.” The bees bustle around, pollinating the flowers, the dancers move together flocking in bird-like formation – just other beings in the landscape.

Tonight’s conversation sees Gablik speak with Moore about his 1992 book, ‘Care Of The Soul’. Serendipitously, Ruth tells me she read the book last year. It was a gift from her sister and at first Ruth was a little skeptical since the edition brands itself ‘The New York Times Number 1 Best Seller.’ Ruth however found herself drawn in and enjoying it. I love these synchronicities that appear over and over again. My discovery of and connection with Suzi Gablik has been full of them. It’s what Gablik refers to as “the methodology of the marvelous.” I’ve read this conversation a number of times in preparation and I know Ruth has too. She seems happy I’ve chosen this one for her and sees the resonances in her own work in terms of Moore’s preoccupations with art and soul.



*Ruth Jones*

Our audience begin to gather, some new faces and many familiar ones who’ve come back to hear and participate in more conversations. My brother Ross appears who has driven five hours from Cambridge as well as two former neighbours from Swansea who’ve come to support me and find out what I’m up to. There are also four of the previous night’s ‘Suzis’ in the audience, come to listen and support. Before we

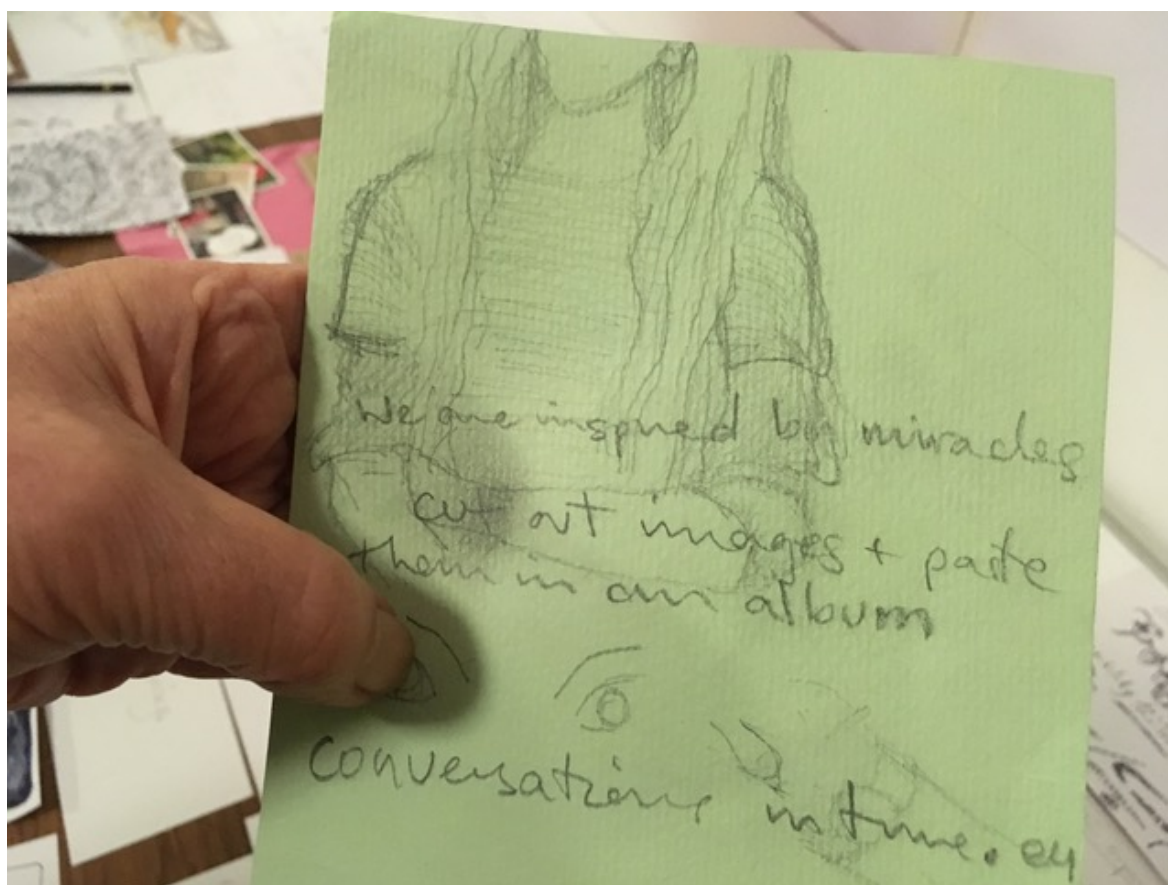
begin the 'performance,' I invite our audience to have small conversations about a place that 'homes them.' The buzz of engaged talk fills the room. We light a candle. This has become a daily ritual. I dedicate the evening to Suzi and to Thomas Moore and the places and spaces that 'home us.'

"3,2,1, PLAY" and we are off. Ruth and I begin speaking along to the recording of the conversation we hear through our headphones. The words go directly into our bodies, bypassing our rational minds. We hear and repeat, hear and repeat, trying to not get too far behind the words. We animate the conversation, we connect to the spirit of Gablik and Moore, literally bringing them into the room. It is an extraordinary process. This is my 6<sup>th</sup> time this week, with a different conversation and a different 'Suzi' each day. It takes full focus and concentration and takes an immense amount of faith and trust from my guest artist to do it for the first time in-front of a live audience. The conversation is rich, animated full. I've taken to making notes during our conversations – somewhat I admit to increase the challenge of this adrenalin-fuelled task and also practically so I can refer to them after. It is actually quite difficult to remember the many details of the conversation after we've finished since our attention is principally focused on reproduction rather than recall.

When we finish, the audience applaud – recognizing the technical challenge of the performance as well as being struck by the many significant points Gablik and Moore raise. Ruth tells us, she had a strong sense of not just replaying but actually being present at the original conversation. She became so absorbed by Moore's intricate train of thought that she finds herself forgetting we were actually reproducing an already existing pre-recorded conversation. So real was this impression that a number of times she begins to worry, thinking to herself "I should come up with something really intelligent to say after he said that!" forgetting that Suzi has already replied (25 years ago) and Ruth has nothing to do with but repeat Gablik's pre-existing responses and questions. The process of re-producing the conversations, is so fascinating, that after each one, we spend a significant chunk of time trying to understand what is actually happening in this strange experiment which literally brings alive a historical transcript of a 25 year old conversation in such an immediate and tangible way. Having participated in every one of these dialogues I firmly believe that conversations are living entities in ways I am not yet able to understand with my rational mind, though every day I have an embodied 'knowing' and direct evidence that this is the case.

There is so much to discuss in terms of the content of 'The Liminal Zones Of The Soul' that in our two and a half hour time slot we only touch on a small proportion of it. We talk about Moore's point, that some art has the ability to "stop time" and give soul "a vacation" from this world. When asked by Gablik which art does this for Moore, he immediately replies "a Bach Partita." Suggestions from our audience, include the work of Bill Viola, James Turrell, Marina Abramovich and AC/DC! Something that many of us resonate with, is Gablik's idea that perhaps the most important thing any of us can do during this time of uncertainty and acceleration is to slow down. We are mindful that since the original conversation, the world has accelerated to an even greater extent, given our widespread and constant connectivity to the internet and mobile phones. Moore believes we have lost the ability to contemplate. We speak of the roots of the word contemplation as opposed to the more mind-centred term meditation and become curious about the current explosion in the number of 'mindfulness' courses now available. We ask how we might develop more contemplative and less mind-based practices?

Moore expresses a deep desire to find a language of non-dualism that does not re-trench us back into old, rigid and unhelpful patterns – mind/body, masculine/feminine, conscious/unconscious. His intention, shared by Suzi, is to find a new way of thinking and being that brings us into an understanding of the non-dualistic and interconnected nature of the universe. Much of our language when we look at it closely, puts us in a particular oppositional relationship with one another, nature and the world. Gablik's excitement speaking with Moore is palpable and it is therefore unsurprising that this conversation is perhaps the longest in the book. Suzi talks of a direct physical transmission or connection with the author when reading 'Care Of The Soul'. The words actually do something to her on an energetic level. Ruth has also experienced this happening; she shares a little about her own teacher the Grief Counselor Stephen Jenkinson who has a passion for exacting language and studying etymology. Words cast spells - we 'spell' words when we write - they change the world and can be a force for good or ill.



*Audience Member Response*

Again, the subject of hope versus hopelessness is raised. This is a major theme running through Gablik's book. "We have to allow ourselves, and have the courage to feel our hopelessness, right to the bottom of it." Many in the audience agree, some find it hard to give up on their hope - it is all they have. We are told that the deeper we get into hopelessness, "the more genuine your optimism is." This appears to be a paradox but not a problem. The one does not discount the other. There is a 'wave/particle' experience of this in quantum terms – it is not an 'either/or' but a 'both/and universe'. Again, we see that our dualistic mind-set, language and education do not equip us for this apparent contradiction.



In a beautiful observation, Moore tells us that we treat everything in our culture as a problem to be solved rather than a mystery to be initiated into. Moore spent 12 years living as a Catholic monk before becoming a psychotherapist and writer. Some of his imagery might be difficult for recovering or lapsed Catholics but again Suzi invites us through example to not become enslaved to a fixed position or opinion where we find ourselves with only two alternatives – to accept or to reject the ideas of another. For her and Moore, ‘meaning’ appears to be overrated, even having the ability to further separate us and is just another indication of how mind-fixated we are.

Throughout the evening, there are bursts of conversation as well as extended moments of silence. For the first time this silence is something named as an active ingredient. It reminds us that silence is a ‘something’ rather than an indication that something is absent. The threads of all the conversations are beginning to come together. We witness a shared language, a shared silence.

I’ve spent 25 years making theatre. In this week-long residency, I am interested in stripping away the unnecessary and concentrating on the essentials - humans being in a space together looking for common ground and hungry for conversations on soul, despair, hope, and art. It is a simple process and a simple offering but only possible if people ‘show up.’ I knew that even if nobody showed up to the conversations I would still do them since I made the decision to record each one and intend to share them with all and anyone interested. But, I have not been alone this week. Others have been hungry for conversation, for connection - to sometimes sit in silence, to sometime speak about what matters most.

I am nearing the end of my time at Small World. We finish tomorrow with our 7<sup>th</sup> and final conversation – with Ann Shrosbree helping me to re-create a conversation between Suzi Gablik

**Listen to the recording of the interview here.**

<https://soundcloud.com/emergence-6/conversations-before-the-end-of-time-ruth-jones>

## Conversation 7: Ann Shrosbree

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### Ten Thousand Artists Not One Master

Ann Shrosbree is my guest artist today to re-produce the conversation: ‘Ten Thousand Artists Not One Master’ between Satish Kumar and Suzi Gablik from January 18<sup>th</sup> 1993 as published in Gablik’s book, ‘Conversations Before The End Of Time.’ Ann is one of the Directors of Small World Theatre, responsible for amongst other things, the best building in Cardigan (and then some). Ann tells me of a significant moment she experienced years ago whilst on a workshop. The participants were each asked to visualize

a vessel that represented or allowed them to realise their own particular life's purpose. Ann closed her eyes and saw a great wooden galleon, peopled by many, busily involved in activities to keep the ship afloat and on course. If you look at the beautiful, low impact, highly sustainable building that is Small World Theatre – there is the galleon. Ann tells me that when it was first built it also creaked like a ship as the great wooden beams settled into position. This great community art space designed by architect Olly Llewelyn is completely built from renewable and recycled sources and rightly recognised by the Design Commission for Wales and. It is one of the most beautiful, distinctive and energy efficient venues in Wales. It is not just a great building. Ann achieved another part of her dream in that the small crew who run the theatre have made it an incredible community resource for the town welcoming a multitude of individuals and groups to be a part of it. It is used. It is loved. It is peopled.



*Ann Shrosbree*

This slightly longer than usual preamble to the account of my final 'Conversation Before The End Of Time' is merited since Ann was a key supporter backing me in my successful application for a Major Creative Wales Award. Part of the deal is that she is also hosting me for this, my second of four, week-long stints as 'Artist In Residence' in venues across Wales. This residency, as many who have been following my project will know is about 'Art, Life and Spiritual Renewal.' My chief focus is a book by the American artist and writer, Suzi Gablik called 'Conversations Before The End Of Time.' Over the course of 7 days it is my aim to re-create 7 of the 19 original dialogues from the book with 7 local artists in front of a live audience and to enagage them all in a discussion on the themes arising.

This is certainly 7 days that shook my world! Well here I am on day 7, preparing for my 7<sup>th</sup> and final conversation. The conversation is between Satish Kumar and Suzi Gablik, it is simultaneously between Ann Shroobree and me. The former, are now both in their 80's and are present in the form of the 25 year-old exchange they shared at Schumacher College in Devon. Today, my and Ann's role is to perform the transcript of their conversation 'as if it were happening here and now.' We do this by listening to the words my partner Phil and I recorded and downloaded onto our phones. The recording is played back through our headphones with Ann and myself attempting to speak the words we hear simultaneously. Ann 'plays' Gablik, I 'play' Kumar but not in the conventional sense. There is no putting on accents, gender-switching, wigs or make-up. This is Brechtian Theatre without smoke or mirrors. Everything is stripped back. Everything is revealed. The conversation *is* the art, not just something which happens after it.

For my last conversation, I wanted to invite Ann to re-produce 'Ten Thousand Artists Not One Master' since it expounds the philosophy of her friend - teacher, activist and Earth Pilgrim - Satish Kumar. A Jain monk at 9, Gandhian by his late teens and peace activist by his mid-twenties, Satish left India and the country of his birth to settle in Pembrokeshire, West Wales where he became Editor of Resurgence Magazine. Inspired by the 'Small Is Beautiful' ideas of E.F Schumacher and the 'Back To The Land Movement' championed by John Seymour and others, Resurgence became a significant platform for the early ecology movement in the UK. At the time of this conversation with Gablik, Kumar had been Resurgence's editor for 19 years. Last year, aged 80 Satish finally stepped down as Editor-in-Chief. As a young man, living in Wales in a community dedicated to self-sufficiency and stewardship of the earth, Satish's friend and neighbour was none other than Ann Shroobree. Ann had originally trained as an artist but was going through a major life transition and wondering what she was going to do with the rest of her life. She burnt her work, stopped making art and came to Wales to drive a tractor. Over 40 years later, Ann tells me that Satish assisted her in bringing about one of the most significant changes in her life. Returning from a meeting with the then, newly established Centre for Alternative Technology in Machynlleth, Satish announced that he had found Ann a job! She was to create a puppet show for families explaining the principles of ecology. Ann took the job, joined forces with Bill Hamblett, then working in marketing and design at Resurgence and Small World Theatre was born - and is still going strong over four decades later.

Satish has also had an enormous influence over my life and work in recent years. I attended a number of short courses on ecology, leadership and systems thinking, at Schumacher College in 2010. Satish is one of the principle founders of Schumacher College - and my work and life changed direction as a result of what I did there. Through Satish, Ann *started* making theatre, through meeting Satish and coming across other significant teachers and mentors at the time, most significantly Suzi Gablik I made a decision to *stop* making theatre and leave the company I co-founded and ran for 25 years. I felt a need to be more pro-actively involved in *living* life rather than *performing* it. For this I had to come off stage and stop doing something which I had done and which I had loved doing for 25 years. This conversation between Satish Kumar and Suzi Gablik for both myself and Ann is therefore one of the most significant in the book. I have met both conversationalists. I also am now getting close to the age that both of them were when they had this conversation in 1993.

It feels appropriate that my residency at Small World Theatre: '7 Conversations Before The End Of Time' finishes with this. It has been an uncanny day today weather-wise, the sky has been yellow, the sun has been red. People have been sharing photos of it all day over the internet as they batten down the hatches in the wake of Hurricane Ophelia. An auspicious day where the elements have been in full force. I will let this final conversation of my Small World residency speak for itself. Here it is...

## Listen to the recording of the interview here.

<https://soundcloud.com/user-443414496/conversations-before-the-end-of-time-ann-shrosbree>



*Small World Theatre*



# With Thanks To:

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**Suzi Gablik and her original interviewees; All 7 contributing artists; All those who turned up and participated in the conversations; Sam Vicary, Bill Hamblett, Jake Whittaker and the rest of the family at Small World Theatre; Philip Ralph.**

## Fern Smith

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Conversations Before The End Of Time is part of Fern Smith's 'Creative Wales' series of residencies, made possible with funding from the Arts Council of Wales, Welsh Government & National Lottery.

Fern Smith has over twenty-five years' experience directing and performing with [Volcano Theatre Company](#). After being awarded the Arts Council of Wales Fellowship on the Clore Leadership Programme in 2009/10, she went on to establish [Emergence](#), an arts and sustainability Community Interest Company, curating events, commissioning art, and undertaking research that champions the role of the creative arts in social and ecological change. She is also a workshop leader, coach, celebrant, wilderness guide, and craniosacral therapist. In 2017, she was awarded a Major Creative Wales Award from the Arts Council of Wales to continue her inquiries into the role of creativity in personal and planetary change. She is an associate of the Annwn Foundation.



Cyngor Celfyddydau Cymru  
Arts Council of Wales

ARIENNIR GAN  
Y LOTERI  
LOTTERY FUNDED



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