**On Being Suzi Gablik:**

**Jess Allen**

**Prelude**

**Facebook post, 27 September 2017.**

Friends, artists, activists, academics, humans...i'm curious - how many of you have read Suzi Gablik? Re-engaging with her 1991 book *The Reenchantment of Art* towards the end of writing up my thesis was fairly mind-blowing. I kept having to refer back to the copyright page to confirm the year it was written in. Having just then spent an intensive period of engaging deeply with the ecological/dialogical/relational/socially-engaged/ art/performance/activism critical literature of the past decade plus I was amazed that Gablik seemed to have been saying/intuiting much of what was to come; so much of what has been said since. And yet, returning to that literature, I could find hardly any citations of her work. More recently, in preparation for [Fern Smith](https://www.facebook.com/fern.smith.1656?fref=mentions)'s upcoming residency at Small World Theatre (below!), I have been reading Gablik's 1995 book, *Conversations Before the End of Time*. This too has blown my mind. And every time I open it, I feel my hackles of indignation rising on her behalf - these conversations, skilfully collated & curated by her, succinctly say so much of what i have sweated to extract from a gazillion publications (often by MEN) written since. Here is mediaeval historian/artist/polymath Christopher Manes talking about the necessity of giving a voice to more-than-human and the hubristic 'fiction of Man' (sounding remarkably like Kingsnorth's/Dark Mountain's 'myth of civilisation'). Here is Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett neatly sidestepping a whole raft of antsy, tricksy debates on the nature of art/aesthetics/art & everyday life/can art ever be activism? etc. by offering her opinion that 'art is that which gives form to value'. Here is Suzi herself expounding the ethical and aesthetic value of the dialogic form to address the ecological and social issues of where we are. And yet... in ALL my reading, no citations that signposted me to it. I didn't even KNOW about this book until this opportunity arose to 'be' Suzi in Fern's recreation of these conversations next month. I still can't quite name WHY I've felt so frustrated about this - I know people write stuff all the time that gets overlooked, perhaps because the climate isn't right for it to be received. But mostly i think what I'm feeling is a sense of wasted time, a desperation that there were these brilliant minds who already knew what mess we were in & saying it, offering ways to change or be differently. And we have been wheel spinning ever since. I was 14 when *Reenchantment* was published, 18 and finishing my A-levels when *Conversations* came out - personal markers for a sense of time and time lost. I think this echoes the realisation that [Sara Penrhyn](https://www.facebook.com/filmmaker.sara?fref=mentions) describes in the opening lines of her brilliant film TIMELINE

[https://vimeo.com/172669824](https://l.facebook.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fvimeo.com%2F172669824&h=ATMrcNbwUPJrUSd7Ni0pbIYrPA98gpThADO1XkuBCDlIP0j8uWUTEE8jBUUsdYv3RpKPn31uq-v6-9HGuUYJVY1tYdov-xjP95fiSZ9tVA7hWsku5QRjybflKrqQhSDm73_Wj3qsl32-exMF0OCKSnNHFF6ncH4LNqC65SOa6-csBhldd7btP7DIjMxLXG6iEr1jh9tVT70mE7GArpYV4O-vdYMa8oKyrCi7g8QsURPMdipyjbaV0hsdZbJOiUisLBe0y5NMMH5wt_eq8gKIPADeGyIk3pltw4c3PKyk).

Talking of her relatively recent discovery of the fact that no babies born in 1976 [the year of her birth] or later would experience 'normal' global temperatures, she says 'it made me feel like a fool. A climate activist trying to save a world already dying when I was born'...

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**On Being Suzi Gablik**

Back when I was doing my dance degree, I wrote an essay about the history of contact improvisation titled ‘Being Steve Paxton’. It was a reference to one of my favourite films, Spike Jonze and Charlie Kaufmann’s surreal 1999 fantasy-comedy *Being John Malkovich*, in which the protagonists stumble on a portal that takes them into the body-mind of US actor John Malkovich (played by himself).

What I eventually wound up saying in that essay, is that the influence of Paxton’s movement form on choreography and dance practice had been so pervasive in the 3 decades since its inception,[[1]](#footnote-1) that it was hard to conceive of how incredibly novel – perhaps even shocking, thrilling – it was to witness or do at that time. In the essay’s title, I was describing my desire to find a portal into Paxton’s 1970s head, so that I might witness and experience those early, explosive experiments in movement and physics for myself, happening *within the context of its own time*.

On Tuesday evening, and quite unexpectedly, I felt that through the ritual process of reading out loud Suzi’s words – without attempting to *be* her in any actorly, dramatic sense, but to be-oneself-being-a-conduit for words originally spoken by another – a portal opened up to another time and another being. This was conjured through the stretched-across-time processes of speaking-recording-transcribing-(editing?)-publishing-purchasing-reading-speaking-re-recording-listening-speaking. At times it felt like I was in a trance. It was a kind of magic. (Or ‘beautifully strange’ as Simon said in his email).

Technically and sort of ‘intellectually’, I found it easy to speak Suzi’s words, because I agreed with them, and indeed feel them myself. And because it was lovely to ‘step into’ the surety of being able to express those feelings out loud to an audience *without* having to find and order the words for myself; to dwell in Suzi’s seemingly effortless articulacy, which I certainly lack when communicating. But what I found/find harder emotionally, is the 2 decades difference in context, or rather the sliding together of those contexts like microscope lens – the global/social/political/ecological backdrops to 1995 and 2017 – so that they might be compared or measured up. There seems to be massive discrepancies of/in scale. It is hard knowing *how* ***long*** *ago* the words were first spoken – and the feelings felt – and *how* ***little***I feel has changed since; indeed how much seems to have gone backwards in terms of a global move towards responding to ecological crisis, which has only continued to worsen.

I have been through my own journey with activism and art in the last 10 years or so. I was a committed environmentalist since my early teens, ever since I had a sort of horrifying epiphany about the human destruction of the world and our deep implication in that during an earnest conversation with my friend Anwen (whose mother was a climate researcher) in her room when we were 13. (I walk past that house on the edge of Coed Penglais every day with my dog Cai now and think of how significant it was. That was also the year before *Reenchantment* was written, though I would never have understood the book then! It’s interesting to muse that I wasn’t ready for the book then, in terms of my age or intellectual maturity. It seems that the art world, equipped to understand it, wasn’t ready to receive or ‘hear’ it for quite different reasons). But after a career journey from science academe through dance training and performance, I only went on to develop my own (walking/dialogic) arts practice in my early 30s. And it was always, already, immediately ‘activist’ – I felt strongly compelled ‘to make art as if the world mattered’. I couldn’t have conceived of doing otherwise. Partly because I think it allowed me to reconcile or creatively synthesise so many seemingly disparate parts of myself in one consuming endeavour. In this sense, perhaps it was even a bit selfish and cathartic, or self-healing at least. It also felt like the best use of my ‘skills’: I’m not a fine artist, or technically skilled dancer or choreographer. If anything, any putative skill I might have is in creatively conceiving of situations in which people can connect – with each other, with place and/or with ideas.

Back – or forward, for time seems to be fluid in thinking about all this – to Laurie and Suzi’s conversation and one of the main things that comes through in this conversation is the idea of fine (especially visual) artists, like Suzi’s respondent Laurie, feeling threatened by the idea that she should no longer be making art for art’s sake (autonomous, art-like art), because both the state of the world *and* the ‘social turn’ in art as Shannon Jackson calls it, conspire to insist that she *should* be making socially engaged work or work that speaks directly to ecological or social ‘issues’. For a while now, and even as an activist artist, I’ve felt sympathy with their position. It’s easy for me: I feel personally compelled to make ecologically/socially engaged work. For me it is an expression of (personal) autonomy, of artistic freedom, because it’s the only art it’s ever really occurred to me to make. I admit, I *did* once feel very frustrated that so-called ecological or site-based dance/performance artists were making beautiful, nuanced work in the natural environment, but were not foregrounding the ‘trouble’ that non-human nature is in and compelling their audiences to *do* something about it. I felt that was art for art’s sake *about/in* ‘ecology’, not art *for* ‘ecology’s’ sake or ‘saving’. But then, in 2013, I suffered a catastrophic loss of faith in environmentalism (which was rather inconvenient, in the midst of a PhD in art and eco-activism!) causing me to no longer believe in ‘saving the planet’ – because that seems to me a curious and hubristic human delusion, that also omits the qualifier ‘for ourselves’. (Here I have felt vindicated and supported by the work of the Dark Mountain project, and particularly Paul Kingsnorth’s collection of essays *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist*.) I think the planet will probably be fine and even finer without us. So I have had to relinquish the old-school activist desire to make art with a ‘message’ – i.e. to encourage some kind of behavioural or political change that might save the planet – in favour of making art that might, on some small level, simply permit a fleeting sense of enchantment or wonder or open up a portal to the sense of possibility for beauty and compassion that exist behind the fragile fabric of the ‘grind’ of everyday life. And in that opening to enchantment, that people might feel an increased ‘attachment’ – as Jane Bennett calls in *The Enchantment of Modern Life* – to life and other life forms, and, even more tenuously, a greater sense of ‘ethical generosity’ towards (as Bennett also says) and desire to participate ethically in, the wonderful, mysterious world.

Apocalypse – death – is coming for humans, I think. (The title of Roy Scranton’s 2014 book *Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene* is inspiring to me). So now I simply wonder how we can live better now. How we can die with grace and not leave things in too dire a state for what remains. How can this terminal diagnosis free or relieve us of something, and and be seen as a space of opportunity? At the end of the reflective essay about my performance piece *All in a Day’s Walk* (a score for a performance in which I lived for a month entirely within the distance I could walk away from home and back in a day, eating only the food that was grown, processed and available within that distance. It was designed to draw attention to loss of functional local rural food infrastucture and since so much of the produce was shipped out of the county to be processed, it left me very hungry – I lost a stone – and I was forced to slow down), I wrote:

My encounter with Dark Mountain gave me permission to begin reorienting my practice away from what I realised had been an activism based on a binary established in childhood – ‘humans-bad/Earth-good’ – and towards one that embraced humanness as part of an ecological totality, a post-human, more-than-human activism of sorts. In this new context, activism that seeks to effect behavioural change towards – or worse, cultivate ‘responsibility for’ – the natural environment seems wholly to reinforce that human/environment binary. It seemed to me to be an instrumentalist approach to activism, derived from an instrumentalist speed-driven culture. Instead the enforced and unfamiliar deceleration of *All in a Day’s Walk* revealed to me that there lies a temporal and physical ‘space between’ slowing and stopping, which echoes that which exists between now and apocalypse, and in which a perverse sort of hope might proliferate ‘[b]ecause there’s still beauty, and there’s still meaning, and there are still things you can do to make the world less bad’ (Kingsnorth cited in Smith 2014, n. p.).

This is a space in which an ‘Uncivilised’ activism can operate, to find ways in which we might simply live better in the time we have left: reconnecting with our humanity and ecology, appreciating our own resourcefulness, celebrating and exercising our ingenuity. We might achieve it playfully, by facilitating (re)enchantment, conviviality, revivifying life and finding ways of recovering lost agency: reminding people that there is joy in the world, and that joy is worth experiencing. I remain interested in the playful possibilities of tracktivism to do this, even in rural landscapes, even on a microscopic scale. Because unusual performative encounters in unexpected rural locations can create an interruption of perception that might itself generate a transitory space of slowing down. In the real time of conversation, of vegetable growing and farming, of ‘maintenance’ and walking – the time that simply takes as long as it takes – is a space in which the fullness of our vulnerable humanity might be explored.

I think I do agree with Rob and Rachel that art [alone] can’t really change the world, but then I think there are too many people to live in the wilderness too. I don’t think much will change the world now, so we had best live in it as mindfully as possible until the end of [our] time. Which is not the end of time full stop.

What I am meandering towards here, is that I really believe that artists should make whatever work that they personally feel compelled to make – if they do that with *integrity* and *(com)passion* not simply cynicism or the endless empty striving for the ‘new’. (Indeed, I wonder if *integrity* might replace *quality* as the marker for ‘good’ Anthropocenic art?) After all, diverse ecosystems are typically healthy ecosystems: as Isabelle Stengers might agree, we need an ‘ecology of [arts] practices’, not just arts for/about/directly engaged in ecology. We also need practitioners who fully put themselves in their work, and how can one do that, if you don’t ‘care’ about the world? I know of artists who *claim* not to care – or who do care, but want to make art as a distraction – and I wonder if they should simply make the art they wish to. . .

I think now there *are* plenty of artists who are relational, socially-engaged practitioners, who include the audience and others, even more-than-human others, in the work. This is at least a recognised field of artistic endeavour now even if it’s hard to make a living out of it and still hard to find the right critical frame for it (as Grant Kester writes about in his 2004 book about dialogic art, *Conversation Pieces*). But what I think *does* still need to change, is the whole ‘art-market’ world that continues to privilege the *saleability* of work in monetary terms. (This is more of a capitalism issue I guess.) And I think there is still that ‘cadre’ that Suzi and Laurie speak of! While some ‘relational’ artists have been admitted in, I still feel it’s hard to be ‘seen’ when the work attempts to intervene in everyday life in quite gentle ways; that seeks to speak directly to everyday (non-art world) people and doesn’t have a beautiful ‘object’ attached to it, simply (one hopes) a beautiful *sentiment.* (The discussion in this conversation on the beauty or aesthetic validity of compassion was very helpful and resonant for me.)

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**Interlude**

Wow. I have just written this entire 1200 words in a couple of hours – this has got to be a record for me, who has become so allergic to writing since the toxic experience of writing my (second!) PhD thesis. . .

I am now going to walk Cai and reflect on what i’ve said. There will be a real-time interlude!

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**Epilogue**

It’s actually been some days now since I wrote the above. In the meantime I’ve read all your reflections Fern (so awe-inspiringly articulate) and oddly, where there are cross-overs between some of the turns of phrase, I’ve wanted to say, ‘I wrote this before I saw yours! I’m not copying, promise!’. Which returns me to the whole academic anxiety around plagiarism and my sort of related and intense frustration that Suzi’s work has not been really widely cited – and *built on* – in all the literature on dialogic/relational/socially engaged art and ecology over the past 2 decades.

It has been indescribably wonderful to be part of this project – thank you. I feel that I have learned so much; it has truly been a gift to participate. To be able to discuss dialogic practice through the dialogic form has been to truly embody, even prefigure, the kind of worlds we might better wish to inhabit.

I have learned that I need to listen more – particularly to you Fern, who (rather like Rich!) are someone who is so good at listening, sometimes I just luxuriate in the being-listened-to and forget to listen-in-return. You have so much wisdom and your reflections have been really humbling.

I’ve had a rocky few days of hormonal turbulence – i’m becoming badly affected by this as I get older, some months to a debilitating degree – echoed in/by the atmospheric turbulence of Hurricane Ophelia we woke up to this morning; freakish high winds, strange orange-pink light, high temperatures and bright, bright red sun-that-looked-like-a-moon. It felt apocalyptic. And as I started my morning aerial yoga practice, I was upside down in an inversion thinking ‘I’m hanging out at the end of time. . .’ And it felt OK.

Like Suzi, I can’t really find adequate words to express what a privilege and an honour it has been to be involved in this. You have created a very special thing here…as you say, I feel there is something seismic and the ripples will keep pulsing outwards. So many little moments of joy and connection - even down to the lovely reconnecting conversation I was able to have with Susan Richardson in the interval of Simon’s evening!

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1. Indeed the form, which I went on to practice and teach to undergraduate on the same course, has become codified to a certain extent, with certain set prepatory exercises, some movement sequences and ‘safe practice’ guidelines. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)