

An Exotic Journey into the Commonplace

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Abstract

Standardized mass-produced commodities, reliance upon electronic data-gathering, and sanitized material manipulations are so pervasive in contemporary industrialized societies that today, 'exotic' experiences activate sensory interactions with the substances and conditions of planet Earth. 'Plugging in' to the international flow of goods and information commonly results in 'tuning out' connections with the immediate surroundings. This essay highlights the capacity of the un-aided mind and body to explore the wondrous complexity of planet Earth. The first part presents four artists who, by engaging geological, biological, and meteorological components of their surroundings, exchange dematerialized surfing activities offered by the World Wide Web, for material actualities. The second section proposes an ecologically responsive regimen for our sensory apparatus, which has grown flabby with disuse. These exercises not only promise the rewards of a good work-out, they simultaneously benefit ecosystems. This paper is related to my forthcoming book, is WHAT'S NEXT? Eco Materialism and Contemporary Art (Intellect Books). The text explores vanguard art in which material interactions are participatory, sensual, and respectful.

Do exotic journeys excite your imagination? This text invites you to travel as far from familiarity as Marco Polo might have travelled by sitting in front of a computer console. Since it is likely that you have already mastered electronic data-gathering and digital manipulation, the exotic destination for this venture is the domain of personal, sensual interactions with compost, sap, pollen, feathers, bark, rock, bone and innumerable other ingredients that account for the wondrous uniqueness of the planet we call home. This journey serves as a reprieve from the sensually numbing forms of interaction exemplified by walking on tarmac and concrete instead of stones and dirt; relying upon GPS's to locate ourselves instead of studying shadows; depending on sequences of numbers to establish our

identities, our addresses, and our wealth; swimming in chemically-laden pools instead of wild waters; communicating via electronic clicks instead of voice and gesture; occupying steady-state architectural interiors that eliminate fluctuating outdoor conditions; relying upon power and water from distant sources; and associating rain with clogged traffic instead of healthy crops.

The distance between us and Earth is elongated by dependence upon thermometers to read temperatures, speedometers to measure speed, odometers to calculate distance, barometers to compute air pressure, and cardiometers to monitor heart rate. Once, when these functions were performed without technological intermediaries, they provided opportunities for a sensual interaction with materials and conditions. Now, we are immersed in the expanded and intensified perceptions at the frontiers of scale. Distance also determines the twin pillars of contemporary experience. They are located among quasars at the outermost edge of the universe and quarks deep within the atom. While these ultra micro/macrosopic explorations excite the imagination, they divert attention from the substances shimmering in our midst. The demotion of the physicality of the *world* as a wondrous domain into something perceived as lackluster, or even *mundane*, is imbedded in the relationships between the words that describe these contrasting territories; the ancient root of the word 'world' (*mundus*) is also the source of the word for 'commonplace' (*mundane*).

The territory of unmediated, human-scaled interactions with the material world is so alien to current experience that, in the whole English language, it has never earned its own word. A non-generic word for the meso/intermediary middle range is needed to describe the ancient (but often neglected) sensuality that abounds and informs the human scale. Thus, a new word was invented to occupy the scale between the 'macro' and 'micro' domains. It is 'muckro.' Muckro evokes the array of sensual qualities that exist at the motor and/or multi-sensory level of human and aesthetic interactions. The muckro realm is located where our feet are located. It consists of everything our hands can touch, our noses can smell, our ears can hear, our mouths can taste. It is where interactions are sensual, intimate, and responsive.

'Muckro' proudly traces its lineage to the word 'muck.' Muck, as a noun, refers to a moist, brown, sticky substance, which explains why the verb 'muck' means to make a mess. Both the noun and the verb might feel 'yukky' to people accustomed to the sterility of electronic devices, machined surfaces, and modern architecture. However, people in tune with growth processes welcome the fertile attributes of muck. The infinite variability, range, and intensity of sensations offered by muck are matched by other muckro-scaled interactions. Muckro experiences veer so far

from hygienic and predictable assumptions about materiality, that these primeval interactions epitomize today's 'avant-garde.' What could be more radical for contemporary city-dwellers, Internet-users, and global-consumers than foraging for dinner, drinking wild water, cultivating soil, and gathering fuel?

Our cultural predisposition to welcome 'high-tech' interventions implies that the reliance upon the biological apparatus we inherited is 'low-tech.' It ignores the fact that the design of the human body and its capacity to gather information and form matter has been undergoing a continuous upgrade over the course of 2,000,000 years of evolutionary tune-ups and adjustments. Like an investment portfolio that is languishing in a safe deposit box, our physicality is 'out-of-service,' a neglected asset that could be accruing dual forms of dividends. One is calculated in terms of sensual delight and enchantment. The other is measured according to the protective and remedial strategies it bestows upon the faltering ecosystems of our planet.

The texts, art examples, and activities that follow provide a trio of means to help people reunite with the sensory receptors that are standard equipment of every living human. Perhaps they also demonstrate that our bodily sensations can be so dazzling, that they reduce digital graphics into passing entertainments.

Muckro Art Works

Erica Fielder's eco-art practice replenishes the mental void where environmental concern might exist. Her primary audience consists of individuals who are thoughtless (indifferent), thoughtless (careless), or thoughtless (negligent). She instills thoughtful action by reactivating the streams of environmental information we are physiologically capable of receiving, but that high speed, digital technologies obviate.

Fielder's involvement with the escalation of sensory capacities is based on the work of eco-psychologist, Dr. Michael J. Cohen, who claims that humans have 53 senses, not just five.¹ He adds, for example, the sense of light, temperature, season, radiation, pressure, gravity, weight, balance, proximity, motion, humidity, fear, play, time, design, etc. Cohen asserts that this load of anatomical, neurological, and perceptual connectors evolved because they were essential for human survival until their take-over by industrial products and electronic technologies.

¹ Cohen, Michael (1997). *Reconnecting with Nature: Finding Wellness Through Restoring Your Bond With The Earth*. Corvallis, OR: Ecopress, pp. 48-50.

Fielder applies Cohen's expansive approach to sensorial experience by creating artworks that invite people to experience the exhilaration of intimate bodily interactions with neglected components of their watersheds. *The Birdfeeder Hat: Seeding Watershed Awareness* (2003), for example, consists of a hat that Fielder meticulously designed to activate and intensify these connections. For six consecutive weekends, at different public locations in northern California, Fielder tied to her head a hand-made hat with a sturdy three foot rim that served as feeding station for birds (Figure 1). Then she assumed a behavioral mode that is an anomaly in contemporary culture. She did not work. She did not sleep. She was not bored. She did not consider this a waste of time. She merely sat quietly and inconspicuously until birds ceased seeing her as a threat. Their arrival was proof that she had become a safe and nourishing component of the landscape.



Figure 1: The Birdfeeder Hat

Fielder invited others to don her feeder hat and enjoy the full body sensory awakening it triggered as people anticipated an avian visitor dining on their heads. The arrival of a hungry bird was registered as a resounding thump even if the bird is only a tiny sparrow. Each twitter and tweet seemed amplified. Even seeds being pecked open and tiny talons scratching and tapping were detectable. Meanwhile, the wearer was required to continually respond to the birds hopping about on the

rim in order to retain balance. Fielder comments, “By awakening the senses and establishing an emotional familiarity with place, participants begin to fly on another’s wing feathers, swim with another’s fins ... I imagine that day when we may truly take our place alongside the myriad of watershed inhabitants, not as dominators, but as equal community members of the home we call biosphere.”²

Amy Franceschini creates artworks that rectify the disassociation between people and their environment by weaning them from dependence upon batteries and mechanics. One example is the *Sundial Watch (SDW)*, 2004, a wearable artwork that invites people to tell time by noting the earth’s position within the solar system, as an alternative to relying upon numerical indicators of seconds, minutes, and hours (Figure 2). In order for the watch to display the correct time, wearers must orient themselves to North.

The website explains, “Sundial Watch is a reaction to the ubiquity of technological devices in our lives today. Sundial watch reminds us to depend on our own devices. It is an interface with nature.... The sun will always rise in the morning and set in the evening, and the length of the winter days will be shorter than the summer days. This portable sundial physically illustrates the wonders of the sun and its motion through the sky providing a stage for the sun’s shadow to dance upon.” The description ends with a significant pronouncement: **BATTERIES NOT INCLUDED.**

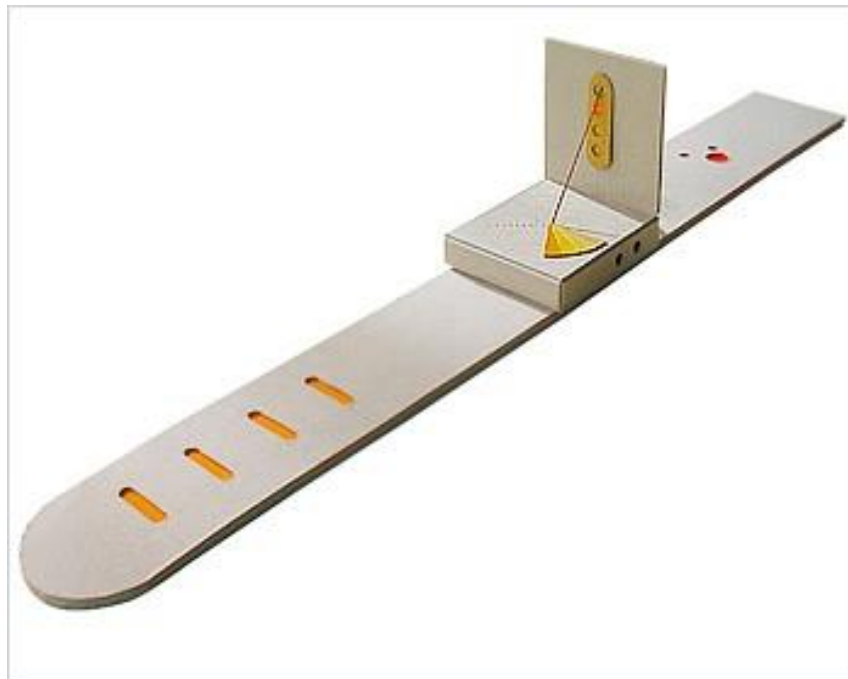


Figure 2: Sundial Watch

² Fielder, Erica (2015). “Returning to the Biosphere.” Unpublished essay.

Rachael Mellors revels in the sensuality of physicality. Her romantic impulses are fulfilled by embracing the planet's material treasures with erotic intensity. The exuberant clay sculptures she creates are small enough to nestle in the palm of a hand (Figure 3 & 4). Mellors explains, "They feel intimate, to be cradled in the hand, from my making hand to be held by another, in the palm or between fingers and hand or resting on thumb and fore finger."³ In addition, they are charged with the powers of her creative partners in the vast eco/bio/geo/hydro forces that abound in Gargarou, Greece, where she spends part of each year.

Mellors's creative process exemplifies full sensory immersion into the material conditions inherent to this seaside location. The region is known for olive groves that perch on cliffs above the sea. Achieving 'muckro' intimacy required replacing five standard studio art conventions:

- Industrially manufactured art mediums are avoided because they prevent sensual engagement with local materials. Instead, Mellors gathers clay directly as it falls from the eroding cliffs, welcoming the shells, stone fragments, and debris that lie embedded in it because they augment her work's connections to its site.
- Hand and power tools are dispensed with because they interfere with the tactile sensations her materials offer. She forms the soft clay by hand.
- A studio is rejected because a roof and enclosing walls isolate occupants the dynamic conditions of wind, temperature, season, and time of day. Mellors locates her forming processes where the clay in her hands was harvested - on the beach or in the shallow waters of the sea. On the beach, the wet clay may be rolled in the sand. If the forming takes place in the olive grove, it may be coated with dirt or ash from previous fires. These added materials melt during the firing, glazing the surfaces with colors and textures that resemble the pottery shards found on the beach, although the surfaces of the shards were 'glazed' by weather, sea, and sand.
- Self-expression is moderated by responsiveness to surrounding conditions. Mellors's sculptures materialize the confluence of her body with the particularities of wind, tide, season, erosion, and sedimentation.
- Process, too, is reconfigured to allow the sea to factor into the sculpting of her artworks; the sun to contribute by drying the artworks that are laid on the beach; and olive trees to contribute their pruned branches as fuel for firing. Ultimately, these procedures replenish the olive groves because Mellors locates the firing there so that the nutrients produced during the firing return to the soil in the form of ash. In all these ways, the creation of

³ Correspondence with the author, February 27, 2017.

art is synchronized to the generative cycle of trees, the annual cycle of seasons, and the geological processes of erosion and decomposition.

Mellors expresses her sensual rapport by commenting, "...being in the presence of what is around me in that moment, moving with sounds I hear, the sea and stones, calls of ravens, owls, jays, wind through the olive trees, bees, geckos, cicadas, even the sounds of chain saws or tractors in the olive groves around, moving with the olive trees, clouds, waves, mountains, sun and moon rising. They all ignite the rhythms in my body and my sculptures come through me as I move."⁴



Figures 3 & 4: Example of Mellors's clay sculpture

⁴ Correspondence with the author, August, 2009.

MUCKRO WORK-OUTS / TUNE-UPS / TURN-ONS

‘Plugging in’ to the international flow of goods and information commonly results in ‘tuning out’ connections with the immediate surroundings. It elevates the horsepower of machines and the megawatt-power of technologies over the corporal power of humans. Contemporary society lacks a training regimen for exploring the wondrous complexity and variability that can be accessed by the un-aided, un-augmented, un-amplified mind and body. Such a regimen may be unfamiliar because engineered devices have usurped our inherent biological equipment for conducting the functions that sustain our lives. The manifold capacities of our bodies have been side-lined by the assumption that manufactured products are more reliable, more sensitive, more powerful, and more perceptive. As such, our sensory apparatus has grown flabby with disuse.

An ecologically responsive art education can provide access to the muckro domain of experience. A muckro training regimen promises the rewards of a good workout: to enhance mood, increase productivity, improve brain power, and augment creativity. It adds the advantage of personalizing the fundamental definition of ‘ecology’ – the study of ‘home.’ Muckro engagement establishes a pathway between a personal ‘home’ in the body, and the shared ‘home’ that is the ecosystem. When these forces merge, individuals are rewarded with the homey satisfaction of comfort, security, and a sense of belonging. But the benefits are also bestowed upon ecosystems that receive the care-giving, maintenance, and protection we regularly confer upon on our homes.

APPENDIX

The curriculum possibilities for muckro engagement are vast because they are unbound by the conventions of studio art assignments. Extensive curriculum ideas are introduced in the book, *What's Next? Eco Materialism and Contemporary Art*. They encourage students to disengage from remote global communications and engage intimately with their immediate surroundings. The prompts that follow identify the extraordinary range of interactions that are explored in the book's 'Muckro Work-outs, Tune-ups' and Turn-ons.'

Note to Instructor

The tools students will use to conduct the following exercises belong exclusively to the physical apparatus they inherited as members of the human species. This strategy of exploration offers students an opportunity to tap into these underutilized instruments of discovery. Their venture is likely to assume the character of an adventure because contemporary humans largely rely upon an extensive arsenal of engineered devices to yield information about the world around them. On the one hand, we depend upon aids as simple as contact lenses and as sophisticated as drones to yield data in real time. On the other hand, we routinely search content in published texts, maps, and online to review previously gathered data. Our physical bodies are neglected tools for detecting and decoding information about our surroundings. Unlike the alternatives, these sensual and perceptual attributes are not only active in real time and space; they are active in our time and space. Because they are self-induced, information-gathering ceases to be mere data-gathering and acquires the rapport we seek from friendship. It is essential to point out to students that the nature of the information that can be accessed through the body deviates from the precise numerical calculations that electronics produce. Bodily-generated information is qualitative. As such, it is enriched by immersion, connection, and attunement. Furthermore, while the exercises are designed to vitalize students' mental and physical capacities to acquire information, the ultimate goal of their construction is utilizing this deepened awareness to attend to the diminishing vitality of planet Earth's systems.

Note to Student

The following exercises are titled 'Muckro Work-outs, Tune-ups' and Turn-ons' because they are designed as a 'fitness' routine to help foster a connection

between you and the physical environment that surrounds you. You will explore this environment by relying upon your body's apparatus for perceiving, detecting, and comprehending. Activating your inherent capacity to gather data is a radical departure from prevailing dependencies upon electronics to 'connect.' By acknowledging your biological operating system, you may discover that your capacity to scan, scroll, surf, search, and share does not depend upon modems, monitors, motherboards, or mice. You were born with an impressive set of tools and portals for performing these tasks. Let us reboot your biological CPU. Explore its capacity for data mining. You may discover that what has been missing from your cache is content that is personal, sensual, and vitalizing; that enchantment can co-exist with data; that routine encounters can become tantalizing pop-ups; and that your home page can be continually refreshed.

MUCKRO EXPLORATIONS of a 10' x 10' SITE

Project Introduction: Find a 10' x 10' site that is located outdoors and allows you continuous access. Visit and revisit the site with mindful observances of the various engagements listed below. You may respond to these prompts via your body and simple tools to create visual art, physical movement, vocalization, written words, etc.

Elements:

- What are the site's inert cultural components (e.g. pathway, architecture, sign, litter, sewer)?
- What are the site's inert natural components (e.g. rocks, pebbles, water)?
- What are the site's domesticated biological components (e.g. pets, people, potted plants)?
- What are the site's undomesticated biological components (e.g. squirrels, weeds, insects)?

Visual Engagements:

- What is the tallest thing?
- What is the smallest thing?
- What is the oldest thing?
- What is the newest thing?
- What is the most ephemeral thing?
- What are the most numerous things?
- What is the shiniest thing?
- Ask and answer two additional questions.

Tactile Engagements:

- What is the most pliable thing?
- What is the most brittle thing?
- What is the fuzziest thing?
- What is the heaviest thing?
- What is the most granular thing?
- What is the wettest thing?
- What is the roughest thing?
- What is the coldest thing?
- Ask and answer two additional questions.

Olfactory Engagements:

- What is a source of the site's most potent smell?
- What is a source of the site's most 'natural' smell?
- What is the source of the site's least 'natural' smell?
- What is the most fragrant thing?
- What is the foulest smelling thing?
- Ask and answer two additional questions.

Aural Engagements:

- What is the dominant sound when you are kneeling?
- What is the highest pitched sound?
- What is the most sustained sound?
- What is the most distant sound?
- What sounds only occur in daytime?
- What sounds are not human-induced?
- Ask and answer two additional questions.

Kinesthetic Engagements:

- What sensations are activated in your feet as you walk around the perimeter of your site?
- What sensations are available to your hands as you walk around the perimeter of your site?
- What is revealed about an object at your site when you lean against it?
- What is revealed about an object at your site when you climb or stand upon it?
- What sensations do you feel when dig into your site?

- What sensations do you feel when you move an object from one location to another?
- Ask and answer two additional questions.

Temporal Engagements:

- What evidence indicates the passage of daylight at your site?
- What evidence indicates the passage of seasons at your site?
- What is the newest object to arrive at your site?
- What is the oldest cultural artifact?
- What is the oldest non-manufactured object?
- What is the most temporary object?
- What is the most enduring object?
- What are the signs of decay?
- What are the signs of vitality?
- Ask and answer two additional questions.

Dynamics:

- What processes (e.g. evaporation) are occurring?
- What elements are growing?
- What elements are decaying?
- What elements are accumulating?
- What elements are disappearing?
- What objects are moving quickly?
- What objects are changing slowly?
- Ask and answer two additional questions.

Wastes:

- What wastes decompose?
- What wastes do not readily decompose?
- What wastes endanger your site?
- What wastes replenish your site as they biodegrade?
- What wastes are unsightly?
- What wastes are being managed by humans?
- What wastes are not being managed by humans?
- Ask and answer two additional questions.

Character:

- Is your site designed or wild?
- Is your site intimidating or comforting?

- Is your site predictable or surprising?
- Is your site picturesque or dreary?
- Is your site safe or dangerous?
- Ask and answer two additional questions.

Analytic Engagement:

- What are your site's cultural assets?
- What are your site's biological assets?
- What are your site's cultural shortcomings?
- What are your site's biological shortcomings?
- What can enhance your site's cultural assets?
- What can enhance your site's biological assets?
- What can diminish your site's cultural shortcomings?
- What can diminish your site's biological shortcomings?
- Ask and answer two additional questions.

Project Practicum: The 'fitness' regimen you just conducted was designed to get you in shape so that you can now feel fortified to improve the site's vitality by adding some thing or some action that is beneficial to the site and/or removing some thing or some action that is harmful to the site. Please do so.

Project Reflection: Notice how each time you visited your site, you altered it. You added sounds, modified air flow, deposited footprints, cast shadows, increased CO₂, and so forth. These impacts are not intentional, rather, they are the inevitable by-products of every living organism upon its surroundings. However, we humans are not merely physical organisms. We also impact our environment by choosing our behaviors. Indulging in contemporary strategies of material manufacture, transport, and disposal represent choices that degrade the planet's systems and deplete its non-renewable resources. But we can also choose beneficial interventions that remediate ecosystem damage and augment ecosystem vitality.

References

Artists' websites:

Erica Fielder

<http://www.ericafelder-ecoartist.com/gallery.html>

Amy Franceschini

<http://www.futurefarmers.com>

Rachael Mellors

<http://www.rachaelmellors.com/work-2>

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