

Dissonances

Open Curriculum: Susannah Haslam in conversation with Charles Pryor.

Charles Pryor is an artist, agroecologist and researcher, who works at the intersection of agroecosystem resilience, more-than-human storytelling, and climate change.

Charles Pryor

I always struggle to think about how to describe myself, because as both an artist and a researcher, I work interdisciplinarily, across practices of agroecology, to the social impacts of the climate crisis in the Global South, to using art as a form of storytelling to help make sense of what it means to live on a damaged planet. I'm an artist engaged in ecology in the broadest sense. More recently, I retrained in the field of Climate Change and International Development, having been trained in Permaculture before. Similar to agroecology, Permaculture can be described as a set of design principles used in both natural and social settings to meet human needs, whilst simultaneously enhancing biodiversity and reducing our impact on the planet. Permaculture and agroecological food systems are the extreme opposite of our dominant industrial and, or, globalised food production models, in that it seeks to harness and mimic natural systems through the production of food. It goes beyond just ecological-productive principles, to also encompass socio-political dimensions, such as issues surrounding food sovereignty, climate justice and peasants' rights, to name a few.

Prior to specialising in Climate Change, as an artist making work about the ecological and climate crisis, I always felt frustrated by my lack of understanding of the subject and felt a need and urgency to further my knowledge. Permaculture was a good starting point for me and gave me the impetus to learn more. Following my Permaculture Design course, I was involved in the urban farming collective Cityplot in Berlin, Germany. It was here where I learnt how effective regenerative food systems were in simultaneously addressing the compounded challenges of capitalism, globalised food systems, ecological collapse and climate breakdown. It was during this time when I realised I wanted to move into climate change-related work. I did a Master of Science (MSc) in Climate Change and International Development, which addressed the science and impact of climate change and included subjects as diverse as climate governance and mitigation, to the political ecology of the environment. Here I had the opportunity to further specialise in Natural Farming techniques and their role in supporting climate change adaptation, during a three-month placement in Andhra Pradesh, India. While I was in India working on Rythu Sadhikara Samstha's (RySS) Community Managed (and Zero-Budget) Natural Farming Programme, which is a farmers' empowerment organisation, I learned a lot about the power of peasant movements and their agroecological allies in repairing the metabolic rift between society and nature, by actively decommodifying nature and revitalising local knowledge systems.

As an artist, I work in video and storytelling. I most recently worked on a collaborative audio-visual story with Marleen Boschen, Lou-Atessa Marcellin and Sara Rodrigues. The speculative story follows the soil as a narrator of, and witness to, the unfolding histories of human cultivation practices and acts of environmental violence. The piece makes audible a living global infrastructure, a carrier for past and present cultivation knowledges. It asks how an earthbound story can be told through something we often unknowingly depend on for the survival of human and non-human ecologies alike.

I am currently working on a video project about seed banking with Marleen Boschen. Seed banking is the process of storing seed to preserve genetic diversity. Organisations around the world are saving seeds (crop and non-crop seeds) for a number of reasons, such as the immediate threat of climate change, or war, basically anything that could potentially make the seed extinct. For this work, we are using footage that was collected from Kostrzyca Forest Gene Bank in Poland, the Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC) in Palestine, and the John Innes Centre, and the Millennium Seed Bank in the UK. Each of these seed banks specialise in different aspects, for example the UAWC in Palestine is a grass-roots organisation working directly with farmers to save seeds, whereas the John Innes Centre is focussed on breeding seeds. We chose to work with these organisations because they each have very different relationships with the seeds that they are conserving, and for different reasons; why they are saving particular seeds, and who they are saving them for. Each organisation also had a very different knowledge system surrounding the

seeds that they are working with. These were important factors in our decision to work with these seed banks. In the case of UAWC, the seeds were being circulated directly by the farmers, therefore reducing farmers' dependence on imported seeds and increasing their autonomy and were purely focused on saving seeds for farmers in the West Bank and Gaza, with the intention to increase farmers' food sovereignty and increase their resilience to climatic drought and political unrest. These different organisations allow us to interrogate different questions concerning what it means to be a seed custodian in uncertain times.

Susannah Haslam

You seem to have found a balance between making art and practicing agroecology — there is a question of affordance in how each practice supports the other, and the questions, or imaginaries that you begin with, and move through in order to arrive at a film on seed banking, for example. The last point you made also begins to outline an ethics of seed banking; those principles of conservation, protection, breeding, in relation to seed epistemologies, and environmental justice form a deft complex of ideas that clearly benefit from practicing as both an artist and agroecologist. In the light of this, what is carbon for you?

Charles Pryor

I guess you would expect that I'd respond to this as a scientist, but I'm not going to. I could approach this question in different ways — I could be quite reductive about it and just tell you what carbon is, but I always try to steer away a little bit from the word carbon because it's everything and everywhere and it's too loaded as a word. It is too all-encompassing for me to properly comprehend its scale and I don't want to reduce it to anything. Often when we talk about carbon, I don't find it particularly useful as a way to think of a way out of, or a way to make do with, the environmental *predicament* that we are in, or the *crisis* that we're in. I think mainly that's because carbon as a word has become greenwashed; it has been mobilised and used to the extent where it no longer retains meaning, if that makes sense.

Carbon isn't just a natural element; it is embedded in absolutely everything. It is all-encompassing. Even technocratic green solutions towards climate mitigation, i.e., wind turbines and solar panels, etc., are carbon. I would argue that these technologies are then all part of the *problem*. The technologies that are trying to address, for example, carbon capture, these more substantial geoengineering projects, are not only very problematic in terms of their funders, i.e., who is funding the technology, but also in the unequal risks they may pose on certain populations, once they are initiated. The materiality of such technology is also part of the problem: their technological machinery, installation labour, and the amount of environmental disruption they cause.

I observe a parallel between technologies such as wind turbines and the heavy-handed, masculine, and destructive attitudes towards the environment. I'm very pessimistic about certain green technologies, particularly the notion of "sustainable development", and most definitely the idea of a Green Industrial Revolution. I believe this to be the same business-as-usual trajectory of history repeating itself. These so-called green technologies follow the usual progressive human narrative and are colonising and destructively careless; the same expansive attitude that got us into this mess in the first place. Paul Kingsnorth speaks very eloquently about this reductive approach to the human-environmental challenge in his book *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist*.

For me, carbon is about thinking about the soil from the grassroots and humane levels, and one which is also more entangled with non-humans. For example, we could think about carbon storage in the soil. This would mean creating new types of relationships with the soil and understanding about how and who soil is constructed for — microbes, critters, minerals. This is the opposite of the hard-technology attitude; carbon is about the soil and soil holds the capacity to not only sequester huge amounts of carbon, but also change our fundamental understanding of how we interact with the non-human world. I believe soil holds the key to most, if not all of our environmental problems.

I guess what I am trying to say, is that we need a new form of relationality between us and all non-human life forms, and I feel the use of green technologies not only creates a further cognitive dissonance between human and non-human, but continues the dominant narrative of humans versus nature by reducing the natural environment to nothing more than ambient energy and capital.

Susannah Haslam

You are really helpfully cutting through much of the hyperbole that we encounter when being told what *the problem* is. I think there's also a real sense of you *feeling* and *thinking* what you are saying, there's a choice involved. It's really insightful as well as very beautiful to hear you say that carbon is about thinking with, though, or, *as though* the soil, especially as an alternative to the technology-centred solutionism that feels extremely contradictory in its destructive capacities, which seem to be so at odds with the soil. It is not news per se to think about how political discourse, for example, shapes how we commonly understand what carbon is, what the climate is, etc., but your attention to the soil greatly brings into relief the consequences of the reflex of obfuscation here: why aren't we thinking about the soil first and foremost?

Charles Pryor

Also that the soil is one of the largest containers of carbon, it makes sense if we are to capture carbon enough to make any difference, we should be doing it from the soil, from the ground up. Hard green technologies are a bit like a plaster on a wound, not necessarily addressing the problem, it's like rubbish that just accumulates.

Susannah Haslam

What you describe is the instrumentalisation of carbon at its most crude. It's incredibly shady; it's using manipulative language and relying on the fact that people might only half know where to locate carbon. The sensibility that acknowledges entanglements between the mattering of carbon, soil, more than human life and human life together feels like a useful perspective to think about solidarity. In the light of the soil, what is solidarity?

Charles Pryor

I think about solidarity from the perspective of an agroecologist, and in relation to humans and non-humans, in the act of gardening and thinking through those companionships formed in gardening. In agroecology, I'm always thinking about different forms of companionships between plants, and how to reap the most benefits between different species of plants. Specifically, how I can bring different plants together to support one another, to protect one another from pests and diseases, to draw nutrients from deep below the soil where most roots cannot reach. This amounts to the idea of solidarity through *making kin* between different elements and living systems and finding forms of mutual support. In a way this definition of solidarity speaks to the practice of ecological design, which engages humans. As a human, I am also an active agent within that design system; I am the steward of that system.

Guilds are also a way of creating solidarity between different ecological systems. A guild might be exemplified by a tree and the companionship plants that surround the tree, which perform different functions in the service of the tree. The tree might provide nuts, and then there might be a ground cover of Comfrey, then the Comfrey's nutrients accumulate and start to pump nutrients from deep down below the soil, allowing them to be accessible to the nut tree. A similar story is the role of Mycorrhizal fungi and how it grows in a beneficial association to plant and tree roots. The Mycorrhizal fungi take sugars from the tree, while exchanging them for nutrients and moisture, therefore increasing the tree's health and improving its resilience. Likewise, the Wood-Wide-Web describes how an extensive network of fungal threads in the soil allows trees to communicate and exchange resources and nutrients when one tree is under threat from disease. This is solidarity at its most intelligent.

I like to think of ecological design thinking here, and also, it's interesting to think about how these translate to human-oriented systems, but perhaps they don't need to be separated and can be observed through the same lens.

Susannah Haslam

I'm drawn to the language you're using; the problems and capacities of language to incarcerate or liberate are an ongoing discussion in the project. It's really enlightening to hear how, with considered language use, the stories of the nut tree, guilds, Mycorrhizal fungi, the Wood-Wide-Web, carbon, and solidarity can be sensitively conveyed and communicated. Further, the prospect of companionship and stewardship demonstrate necessary practices of care — love and dialogue. This also reminds me of what Jean-Luc

Nancy frames as the idea of *being with* before the self. Which isn't solely a practice of care, but an altogether different composition of being, a different make up, a different starting point to one which posits hard green technology as the solution, which seems to be about accumulation and individually oriented betterment.

To be with before the self, in companionship, is also to admit that *I can't live without you*; without knowing this, that I can't live without understanding that the soil carries carbon, about the nut tree's guild, and the infinite systems of solidarity deeper than the soil. *I can't live without you*, first and foremost, and then, I must learn of your motives.

To return to the issue of separation of human and more than human life and its systems of design, it's difficult not to speak in metaphors here when we encounter this level of complex life, and this might be in part because we, as human agents, cannot fathom the depths of the communication network you describe beneath the soil. But then, what you describe is also very relatable, akin to how we might imagine our own human communities and companionships.

But I'm also mindful that this idea of making something relatable is also part of the problem. I think we often try to talk about relationality and being in *relationship to* and *with*, as a way to distance ourselves from that subject, object, of nature, the climate, as a sort of social reflex to mark out our proximity to accountability, inasmuch as control over it. And so we try to (or resist) place(/ing) ourselves, or position(/ing) ourselves, in order to understand the problem or, I think importantly, to learn in relation. The problem of metaphors and language here might then be resolved by speaking as *we* in this case.

To return to the guild of the tree, what you describe seems to speak to a form of equity building or mutuality that we also talk about in relation to caring and accountable institutions, something specifically we are aiming for through striking in solidarity with colleagues — in relation to the organisations and institutions that the SDNP project is working in relation to. What does it mean to be *in solidarity* with colleagues who are being made redundant by the designed systems of education institutions? Though the ground is different, there is a similar imperative to think through the collective *we* of an institution of workers. Are forms of companionship within the tree guild the same as forms of companionship within institutional settings?

Charles Pryor

Yes. To create that type of solidarity — colleagues on strike together or the guild — the human needs to be more connected to the non-human — and the problem with relationality is that there is often a lack of care which needs to be rekindled to strengthen solidarity between people or non-humans or whichever agents. There needs to be care to create solidarity; there also needs to be empathy, which is entangled with care.

Susannah Haslam

You mentioned that permaculture is a system of mutual support; so in the context of carbon and solidarity — which both become proxy questions for *what is love* — in human-led organisation, how can we learn from permaculture and the tree guild? And is learning about greenhouse gases and climate statistics part of this?

Charles Pryor

To put it very literally, for me at least, observation has been really important. This could be as simple as taking real observation: it can be in the city looking out your bedroom window at a tree and observing it on a daily basis — observing what habitat it provides, what happens to it throughout the seasons. In permaculture, one of the first things I got taught was to learn how to observe. Bill Mollison says that before you intervene in a natural system, you should observe it for at least a year; don't read too much, don't get too academic about it, just really observe it. I think it ties in nicely with the question of solidarity because I think observation requires a slowness. I think that is perhaps what we're missing in society, or at least, it is increasingly difficult to access and afford. Slowness enables you to observe: it enables you to understand these different forms of relationality, but also helps you to understand processes that happen between two elements, for example.

Isabelle Stengers' book, *Another Science Is Possible: A Manifesto for Slow Science* speaks to what I was talking about at the beginning of our conversation in relation to hard green technology, as the opposite of a slow science. Slow science enables learning in a very different way, helping us to engage with ideas of care and solidarity. Observation is likely to increase general consciousness and awareness of how different systems interact, and how there's always a level of co-dependency between different living organisms.

Susannah Haslam

Slowness also speaks to privilege; the privilege to be able to find time or take time. I think it could be useful here as a genuine proposition to those in power as a tool to make decisions for and with the climate. When you talk about slowness, this privileging of time is acknowledged, as, importantly, I think your proposition of slowness marked by observation is less solely temporally located, and rather involves focus, commitment, cooperation, and respect. In this way, slowness is not determined by linear time and the narratives and languages of power often associated with such linearity. So, to think through slowness as a mode of observation that is detached from the constraints of linear time, requires us to rethink time as we commonly understand it. That is, it's less to do with how it is filled, and more to do with how we exist in it, experience, and encounter it, as with observation.

Charles Pryor

An example here could be gardening and growing: you're committed to it, you put the seed in the ground, and then you're like, 'oh, okay, now I have to look after it for five months.' That's it. And with that slowness also comes learning through observations of care.

Susannah Haslam

This is a brilliant example, which helps to mark out how at odds we are with slowness as a sensibility, culturally — we need to know everything immediately. SDNP's open curriculum tries to move the idea of learning away from that logic of immediacy, that $a+b=c$, and proposes that something like lifelong learning, through practices such as observation, listening, are necessary for just transition in arts organisations and beyond. So for you, as an artist and agroecologist then, how useful is the framing of art for climate justice — what can art do for climate literacy? Another way to ask this might be to return to the question of affordance — what is the affordance of art as a location for climate literacy and climate justice? Equally, to return to soil, as an example, *thinking as* and *being as* soil is, what does that process of *thinking* and *being* otherwise, i.e., speculatively, do for those heavy narratives on carbon and climate change?

Charles Pryor

Personally, I have always struggled as an artist with the broader problems of accessibility and making work which is accessible to everyone from all walks of life, from all disciplines. In regard to this broadly, as a tool that could be incredibly useful, and incredibly useful not just for artists, I guess this is a question of how it is materialised, and how it is disseminated beyond its lifespan. We are mostly all familiar with the prospect that within the arts, once the funding has run out, the project just disappears into the ether. It might be archived somewhere, but it's no longer actively living. The difference with this project, I hope, is that it will be something which is actively utilised beyond its launch.

I'm also thinking specifically about the importance of storytelling, in terms of my work as an artist more than as an agroecologist. Much of my work is oriented around a story of some description. In regard to accessibility, storytelling becomes vital, for not only those in the present, as this work is materialised, but also for those engaging with the work in the future. I'm interested in the idea of future access. For me, stories and storytelling are very useful objects and tools to help us both to come to terms with the crisis that we live in, and also create capacity to help imagine new spaces. The imaginary then becomes very important in this conversation to help us to come together and collectively envision new ways of living.

Susannah Haslam

With that, there's an important consideration about who gets to write those narratives too; how can those narratives account for multitudinous voices, positions, and subjects. I think this raises an additional question of art's responsibility, equally of science's responsibility — should they be separate?

Sunlight Doesn't Need a Pipeline is a collaborative literacy and climate justice project in search of transformative and regenerative repair for the art sector and beyond. It was initiated and led by Dani Admiss. Commissioned by the Stanley Picker Gallery, Kingston University. www.sunlightdoesntneedapipeline.com

Charles Pryor

This is something I still struggle with, bringing art and agroecology together is very difficult because, physically, their manifestation, in my work, is very different. For me, the endpoint definitely is not art.

As an artist, I have spent the past six years shying away from *being* an artist, perhaps because of this question of what art can do. And I think because I want to make work about something which is quite grand, and quite threatening, in terms of the subject of the ecological breakdown, it's easier to separate. This is the problem: as an agroecologist, I'm going to deal with ecological breakdown in the physical sense, and as an artist, I'm going to intellectually speculate about something and not necessarily let it go beyond that ... I feel like maybe it's more of a question to do with process: what types of spaces enable a certain process to materialise whereby they don't necessitate object forms? Art *work* could purely be orientated around its relationality in some description; it needs to have some kind of scope to be retained in history, like *The Bible*, you can refer to it when you need to.

To add: in thinking about decarbonisation, I wanted to refer to the work of Tony Allan and his idea of *virtual water* from his book, *Virtual Water: Tackling the Threat to Our Planet's Most Precious Resource*. Virtual water is a way of linking and making visible the amount of water virtually embedded in food and trade, and thereby drawing attention to how water shortages can be solved by global economic processes.

Think of a cup of coffee. How much water do you think it would take to make a cup of coffee? The answer is 140 litres. This vast sum of water accounts for the amount of water used across the entire lifecycle of the product, including growing the beans, packaging and shipping.

What makes this concept particularly useful, is it makes visible not only the embedded "virtual" water in any given object's life cycle, and more importantly it brings to our attention how global economic processes are intrinsic in the displacement of environmental resources, and therefore contribute to the distancing of the consumer from the product — a counter strategy to this would be the farm-to-fork movement.

Lastly, in the context of virtual water, it is often used as a metaphor to explain how water-scarce countries can alleviate their water scarcity by importing goods with embedded virtual water or vice versa. Using Sudan as an example as a water-scarce country — by importing fruit Sudan is hypothetically mitigating a certain level of water scarcity because, agriculturally, it doesn't need to grow the apple. Sudan has imported it from another country which isn't water-scarce. So technically, Sudan is importing an apple, and also importing the water that's embedded within the apple.

I mention this because it's a useful story from the perspective of decarbonisation; for digging really deep into thinking about, not only the life cycle of material, whether that be non-material, material, or edible, but also global supply chains and how complex and multi-layered they are. In a way, it's a bit like the idea of carbon footprinting. It digs a little bit deeper though as you're considering all of the ingredients that have gone into the process of making something, not just the energy that's produced to exert that production; all the elements contained within the object. And you can go quite far with it if you're thinking about creating a just energy transition: you could go further and trace the source of the water, for example, and the source of the water could be created from a dam, but the dam might be blocking the water supply to communities further down the line. It's quite a useful way of unpacking things.

Dani Admiss

I think virtual water brings up an almost special understanding of the distribution of goods and resources. Actually, the better the tools we have to think about how we share resources, the more we start to realise that we're so entangled with one another across borders that actually it becomes impossible to account for any sort of polluting emissions because we're completely intrinsically linked in many different ways. The footprint is such a blunt tool for such a complex problem.

References

carbon footprint/ing
 Sudan
 virtual water
 Tony Allan, *Virtual Water: Tackling the Threat to Our Planet's Most Precious Resource*
 The Bible
 storytelling
 Isabelle Stengers, *Another Science is Possible: A Manifesto for Slow Science*
 Bill Mollison
 Mycorrhizal fungi
 Comfrey
 guilds
 steward
 making kin
 companionships
 Paul Kingsnorth, *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist*
 Green Industrial Revolution
 predicament
 seed custodian
 seedbanking
 Kostrzyca Forest Gene Bank, Poland
 Millennium Seed Bank, UK
 Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC), Palestine
 John Innes Centre, UK
 Andhra Pradesh, India
 Natural Farming
 political ecology of the environment
 climate governance and mitigation
 Cityplot, Germany
 Permaculture