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How to Do Nothing

Resisting
the Attention
Economy

Jenny Odell

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Introduction

Surviving Usefulness

Redemption preserves itself in a small crack
in the continuum of catastrophe.

—WALTER BENJAMIN¹

Nothing is harder to do than nothing. In a world where our value is determined by our productivity, many of us find our every last minute captured, optimized, or appropriated as a financial resource by the technologies we use daily. We submit our free time to numerical evaluation, interact with algorithmic versions of each other, and build and maintain personal brands. For some, there may be a kind of engineer's satisfaction in the streamlining and networking of our entire lived experience. And yet a certain nervous feeling, of being overstimulated and unable to sustain a train of thought, lingers. Though it can be hard to grasp before it disappears behind the screen of distraction, this feeling is in fact urgent. We still recognize that much of what gives one's life meaning stems from accidents, interruptions, and serendipitous encounters: the "off time" that a mechanistic view of experience seeks to eliminate.

Already in 1877, Robert Louis Stevenson called busyness a "symptom of deficient vitality," and observed "a sort of dead-alive, hackneyed people about, who are scarcely conscious of living except in the exercise of some conventional occupation."² And, after all, we only go around once. Seneca, in "On the Shortness of Life," describes the horror of looking back to see that life has slipped be-

tween our fingers. It sounds all too much like someone waking from the stupor of an hour on Facebook:

Look back in memory and consider . . . how many have robbed you of life when you were not aware of what you were losing, how much was taken up in useless sorrow, in foolish joy, in greedy desire, in the allurements of society, how little of yourself was left to you; you will perceive that you are dying before your season!³

On a collective level, the stakes are higher. We know that we live in complex times that demand complex thoughts and conversations—and those, in turn, demand the very time and space that is nowhere to be found. The convenience of limitless connectivity has neatly paved over the nuances of in-person conversation, cutting away so much information and context in the process. In an endless cycle where communication is stunted and time is money, there are few moments to slip away and fewer ways to find each other.

Given how poorly art survives in a system that only values the bottom line, the stakes are cultural as well. What the tastes of neoliberal techno manifest—destiny and the culture of Trump have in common is impatience with anything nuanced, poetic, or less-than-obvious. Such “nothings” cannot be tolerated because they cannot be used or appropriated, and provide no deliverables. (Seen in this context, Trump’s desire to defund the National Endowment for the Arts comes as no surprise.) In the early twentieth century, the surrealist painter Giorgio de Chirico foresaw a narrowing horizon for activities as “unproductive” as observation. He wrote:

In the face of the increasingly materialist and pragmatic orientation of our age . . . it would not be eccentric in the future to contemplate a society in which those who live for the pleasures of the mind will no longer have the right to demand their place in the sun. The writer, the thinker, the dreamer,

the poet, the metaphysician, the observer . . . he who tries to solve a riddle or to pass judgement will become an anachronistic figure, destined to disappear from the face of the earth like the ichthyosaur and the mammoth.⁴

This book is about how to hold open that place in the sun. It is a field guide to doing nothing as an act of political resistance to the attention economy, with all the stubbornness of a Chinese “nail house” blocking a major highway. I want this not only for artists and writers, but for any person who perceives life to be *more than an instrument* and therefore something that cannot be optimized. A simple refusal motivates my argument: refusal to believe that the present time and place, and the people who are here with us, are somehow not enough. Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram act like dams that capitalize on our natural interest in others and an ageless need for community, hijacking and frustrating our most innate desires, and profiting from them. Solitude, observation, and simple conviviality should be recognized not only as ends in and of themselves, but inalienable rights belonging to anyone lucky enough to be alive.

THE FACT THAT the “nothing” that I propose is only nothing from the point of view of capitalist productivity explains the irony that a book called *How to Do Nothing* is in some ways also a plan of action. I want to trace a series of movements: 1) a dropping out, not dissimilar from the “dropping out” of the 1960s; 2) a lateral movement outward to things and people that are around us; and 3) a movement downward into place. Unless we are vigilant, the current design of much of our technology will block us every step of the way, deliberately creating false targets for self-reflection, curiosity, and a desire to belong to a community. When people long for some kind of escape, it’s worth asking: What would “back to the land” mean if we understood the land to be where we are right now? Could “aug-

mented reality” simply mean putting your phone down? And what (or who) is that sitting in front of you when you finally do?

It is within a blasted landscape of neoliberal determinism that this book seeks hidden springs of ambiguity and inefficiency. This is a four-course meal in the age of Soylent. But while I hope you find some relief in the invitation to simply stop or slow down, I don’t mean this to be a weekend retreat or a mere treatise on creativity. The point of doing nothing, as I define it, isn’t to return to work refreshed and ready to be more productive, but rather to question what we currently perceive as productive. My argument is obviously anticapitalist, especially concerning technologies that encourage a capitalist perception of time, place, self, and community. It is also environmental and historical: I propose that rerouting and deepening one’s attention to place will likely lead to awareness of one’s participation in history and in a more-than-human community. From either a social or ecological perspective, the ultimate goal of “doing nothing” is to wrest our focus from the attention economy and replant it in the public, physical realm.

I am not anti-technology. After all, there are forms of technology—from tools that let us observe the natural world to decentralized, noncommercial social networks—that might situate us more fully in the present. Rather, I am opposed to the way that corporate platforms buy and sell our attention, as well as to designs and uses of technology that enshrine a narrow definition of productivity and ignore the local, the carnal, and the poetic. I am concerned about the effects of current social media on expression—including the right not to express oneself—and its deliberately addictive features. But the villain here is not necessarily the Internet, or even the idea of social media; it is the invasive logic of *commercial* social media and its financial incentive to keep us in a profitable state of anxiety, envy, and distraction. It is furthermore the cult of individuality and personal branding that grow out of such platforms and affect the way we think about our offline selves and the places where we actually live.

GIVEN MY INSISTENCE on attending to the local and present, it’s important that this book is rooted in the San Francisco Bay Area, where I grew up and where I currently live. This place is known for two things: technology companies and natural splendor. Here, you can drive directly west from venture-capitalist offices on Sand Hill Road to a redwood forest overlooking the sea, or walk out of the Facebook campus into a salt marsh full of shorebirds. When I was growing up in Cupertino, my mom would sometimes take me to her office at Hewlett-Packard, where I once tried on a very early version of a VR headset. To be sure, I spent a lot of time inside on the computer. But on other days my family would go for long hikes among the oak trees and redwoods in Big Basin, or along the cliffs at San Gregorio State Beach. In the summer, I was often away at camp in the Santa Cruz Mountains, forever learning the name *Sequoia sempervirens*.

I am an artist as well as a writer. In the early 2010s, because I used computers to make my art and maybe because I lived in San Francisco, I got shunted into the catch-all “art-and-technology” category. But my only real interest in technology was how it could give us more access to physical reality, which is where my real loyalties were. This put me in sort of an odd position, as someone who gets invited to tech conferences but who would rather be out bird-watching. It’s just one of the strangely “in-between” aspects of my experience, first of all as a biracial person, and secondly as one who makes digital art about the physical world. I have been an artist in residence at such strange places as Recology SF (otherwise known as “the dump”), the San Francisco Planning Department, and the Internet Archive. All along, I’ve had a love-hate relationship with Silicon Valley as the source of my childhood nostalgia and the technology that created the attention economy.

Sometimes it’s good to be stuck in the in-between, even if it’s

uncomfortable. Many of the ideas for this book formed over years of teaching studio art and arguing its importance to design and engineering majors at Stanford, some of whom didn't see the point. The sole field trip in my digital design class is simply a hike, and sometimes I have my students sit outside and do nothing for fifteen minutes. I'm realizing that these are my ways of insisting on something. Living between the mountains and this hyper accelerated, entrepreneurial culture, I can't help but ask the question: What does it mean to construct digital worlds while the actual world is crumbling before our eyes?

The odd activities of my class also come from a place of concern. Among my students and in many of the people I know, I see so much energy, so much intensity, and so much anxiety. I see people caught up not just in notifications but in a mythology of productivity and progress, unable not only to rest but simply to see where they are. And during the summer that I wrote this, I saw a catastrophic wildfire without end. This place, just as much as the place where you are now, is calling out to be heard. I think we should listen.

LET'S START in the hills overlooking Oakland, the city where I currently live. Oakland has two famous trees: first is the Jack London Tree, a gigantic coast live oak in front of City Hall, from which the city gets its tree-shaped logo. The other, which is hidden among the hills, is not as well known. Nicknamed the "Grandfather" or "Old Survivor," it's Oakland's only old-growth redwood left standing, a miraculous five-hundred-year-old holdover from the time before all of the ancient redwoods were logged following the Gold Rush. Though much of the East Bay Hills are covered in redwoods, they are all second growth, sprouted from the stumps of ancestors that at one point were some of the largest on the entire coast. Before 1969, people in Oakland assumed that all of the old-growth trees were gone, until a naturalist happened upon Old Survivor towering over the other trees. Since then, the ancient tree has figured in the

collective imagination, prompting articles, group hikes, and even a documentary.

Before they were logged, the old-growth redwoods of the East Bay Hills also included the Navigation Trees, redwoods that were so tall that sailors in the San Francisco Bay used them to steer clear of the submerged and dangerous Blossom Rock. (When the trees were logged, the Army Corp of Engineers had to literally blow up Blossom Rock.) Though it wasn't one of those trees, I like to think of Old Survivor as its own kind of navigational aid. This wizened tree has a few lessons to teach us that correspond to the course I will try to chart throughout this book.

The first lesson is about resistance. Old Survivor's somewhat legendary status has to do not only with its age and unlikely survival, but its mysterious location. Even those who grew up hiking in the East Bay Hills can have a hard time finding it. When you do spot Old Survivor, you still can't get that close, because it sits on a steep rocky slope whose ascent would require a serious scramble. That's one reason it survived logging; the other reason has to do with its twisted shape and its height: ninety-three feet, a runt compared to other old-growth redwoods. In other words, Old Survivor survived largely by appearing useless to loggers as a timber tree.

To me, this sounds like a real-life version of a story—the title of which is often translated as "The Useless Tree"—from the *Zhuangzi*, a collection of writings attributed to Zhuang Zhou, a fourth-century Chinese philosopher. The story is about a carpenter who sees a tree (in one version, a serrate oak, a similar-looking relative to our coast live oak) of impressive size and age. But the carpenter passes it right by, declaring it a "worthless tree" that has only gotten to be this old because its gnarled branches would not be good for timber. Soon afterward, the tree appears to him in a dream and asks, "Are you comparing me with those useful trees?" The tree points out to him that fruit trees and timber trees are regularly ravaged. Meanwhile, uselessness has been this tree's strategy: "This is of great use to me. If I had been of some use, would I ever have grown this large?"

The tree balks at the distinction between usefulness and worth, made by a man who only sees trees as potential timber: "What's the point of this—things condemning things? You a worthless man about to die—how do you know I'm a worthless tree?"⁵ It's easy for me to imagine these words being spoken by Old Survivor to the nineteenth-century loggers who casually passed it over, less than a century before we began realizing what we'd lost.

This formulation—the usefulness of uselessness—is typical of Zhuang Zhou, who often spoke in apparent contradictions and non sequiturs. But like his other statements, it's not a paradox for the sake of being a paradox: rather, it's merely an observation of a social world that is itself a paradox, defined by hypocrisy, ignorance, and illogic. In a society like that, a man attempting a humble and ethical life would certainly appear "backward": for him, good would be bad, up would be down, productivity would be destruction, and indeed, uselessness would be useful.

If you'll allow me to stretch this metaphor, we could say that Old Survivor was *too weird* or *too difficult* to proceed easily toward the sawmill. In that way, the tree provides me with an image of "resistance-in-place." To resist in place is to make oneself into a shape that cannot so easily be appropriated by a capitalist value system. To do this means refusing the frame of reference: in this case, a frame of reference in which value is determined by productivity, the strength of one's career, and individual entrepreneurship. It means embracing and trying to inhabit somewhat fuzzier or blobbier ideas: of maintenance as productivity, of the importance of nonverbal communication, and of the mere experience of life as the highest goal. It means recognizing and celebrating a form of the self that changes over time, exceeds algorithmic description, and whose identity doesn't always stop at the boundary of the individual.

In an environment completely geared toward capitalist appropriation of even our smallest thoughts, doing this isn't any less uncomfortable than wearing the wrong outfit to a place with a

dress code. As I'll show in various examples of past refusals-in-place, to remain in this state takes commitment, discipline, and will. Doing nothing is *hard*.

THE OTHER LESSON that Old Survivor offers us has to do with its function as witness and memorial. Even the most stalwart materialist must admit that Old Survivor is different from a man-made monument because it is, after all, *alive*. In a 2011 issue of a community newspaper called *MacArthur Metro*, the late Gordon Lavery, then a retired East Bay Municipal Utility District worker, and his son Larry, wrote a paean to Old Survivor: "There's a fella who lives high up on a slope in nearby Leona Park who's been a witness to our madness here for as long as people have been in Oakland. His name is Old Survivor. He's a redwood tree and he's old." They frame the tree as a witness to history, from the hunting and gathering of the Ohlone people, to the arrival of the Spanish and the Mexicans, to the white profiteers. The tree's viewpoint—unchanging vis-à-vis the many successive follies of newcomers—ultimately makes it a moral symbol for the Lavertys: "Old Survivor still stands . . . as a sentinel to remind us to make our choices wisely."⁶

I see him the same way. Old Survivor is above all a physical fact, a wordless testament to a very real past, both natural and cultural. To look at the tree is to look at something that began growing in the midst of a very different, even unrecognizable world: one where human inhabitants preserved the local balance of life rather than destroying it, where the shape of the coastline was not yet changed, where there were grizzly bears, California condors, and Coho salmon (all of which disappeared from the East Bay in the nineteenth century). This is not the stuff of fable. Indeed, it wasn't even that long ago. Just as surely as the needles that grow from Old Survivor are connected to its ancient roots, the present grows out of the past. This rootedness is something we desperately need when

we find ourselves awash in an amnesiac present and the chain-store aesthetic of the virtual.

These two lessons should give you a sense of where I'm headed in this book. The first half of "doing nothing" is about disengaging from the attention economy; the other half is about reengaging with something else. That "something else" is nothing less than time and space, a possibility only once we meet each other there on the level of attention. Ultimately, against the placelessness of an optimized life spent online, I want to argue for a new "placefulness" that yields sensitivity and responsibility to the historical (what happened here) and the ecological (who and what lives, or lived, here).

In this book, I hold up bioregionalism as a model for how we might begin to think again about place. Bioregionalism, whose tenets were articulated by the environmentalist Peter Berg in the 1970s, and which is widely visible in indigenous land practices, has to do with an awareness not only of the many life-forms of each place, but how they are interrelated, including with humans. Bioregionalist thought encompasses practices like habitat restoration and permaculture farming, but has a cultural element as well, since it asks us to identify as citizens of the bioregion as much as (if not more than) the state. Our "citizenship" in a bioregion means not only familiarity with the local ecology but a commitment to stewarding it together.

It's important for me to link my critique of the attention economy to the promise of bioregional awareness because I believe that capitalism, colonialist thinking, loneliness, and an abusive stance toward the environment all coproduce one another. It's also important because of the parallels between what the economy does to an ecological system and what the attention economy does to our attention. In both cases, there's a tendency toward an aggressive monoculture, where those components that are seen as "not useful" and which cannot be appropriated (by loggers or by Facebook) are the first to go. Because it proceeds from a false understanding of life as atomized and optimizable, this view of usefulness fails to

recognize the ecosystem as a living whole that in fact needs all of its parts to function. Just as practices like logging and large-scale farming decimate the land, an overemphasis on performance turns what was once a dense and thriving landscape of individual and communal thought into a Monsanto farm whose "production" slowly destroys the soil until nothing more can grow. As it extinguishes one species of thought after another, it hastens the erosion of attention.

Why is it that the modern idea of productivity is so often a frame for what is actually the *destruction* of the natural productivity of an ecosystem? This sounds a lot like the paradox in Zhuang Zhou's story, which more than anything is a joke about how narrow the concept of "usefulness" is. When the tree appears to the carpenter in his dream, it's essentially asking him: Useful for what? Indeed, this is the same question I have when I give myself enough time to step back from the capitalist logic of how we currently understand productivity and success. Productivity that produces what? Successful in what way, and for whom? The happiest, most fulfilled moments of my life have been when I was completely aware of being alive, with all the hope, pain, and sorrow that that entails for any mortal being. In those moments, the idea of success as a teleological goal would have made no sense; the moments were ends in themselves, not steps on a ladder. I think people in Zhuang Zhou's time knew the same feeling.

There's an important detail at the beginning of the useless tree story. Multiple versions of it mention that the gnarled oak tree was so large and wide that it should shade "several thousand oxen" or even "thousands of teams of horses." The shape of the useless tree does more than just protect it from the carpenter; it is also the shape of care, of branching out over the thousands of animals who seek shelter, thus providing the grounds for life itself. I want to imagine a whole forest of useless trees, branches densely interwoven, providing an impenetrable habitat for birds, snakes, lizards, squirrels, insects, fungi, and lichen. And eventually,

through this generous, shaded, and useless environment might come a weary traveler from the land of usefulness, a carpenter who has laid down his tools. Maybe after a bit of dazed wandering, he might take a cue from the animals and have a seat beneath an oak tree. Maybe, for the first time ever, he'd take a nap.

LIKE OLD SURVIVOR, you'll find that this book is a bit oddly shaped. The arguments and observations I'll make here are not neat, interlocking parts in a logical whole. Rather, I saw and experienced many things during the course of writing it—things that changed my mind and then changed it again, and which I folded in as I went. I came out of this book different than I went in. So, consider this not a closed transmission of information, but instead an open and extended essay, in the original sense of the word (a journey, an essaying forth). It's less a lecture than an invitation to take a walk.

The first chapter of this book is a version of an essay I wrote in the spring following the 2016 election, about a personal state of crisis that led me to the necessity of doing nothing. In that chapter I begin to identify some of my most serious grievances with the attention economy, namely its reliance on fear and anxiety, and its concomitant logic that "disruption" is more productive than the work of maintenance—of keeping ourselves and others alive and well. Written in the midst of an online environment in which I could no longer make sense of anything, the essay was a plea on behalf of the spatially and temporally embedded human animal; like the technology writer Jaron Lanier, I sought to "double down on being human."

One reaction to all of this is to head for the hills—permanently. In the second chapter, I look at a few different people and groups who took this approach. The countercultural communes of the 1960s in particular have much to teach us about the challenges inherent in trying to extricate oneself completely from the fabric of a capitalist reality, as well as what was sometimes an ill-fated attempt

to escape politics altogether. This is the beginning of an ongoing distinction I'll make between 1) escaping "the world" (or even just other people) entirely and 2) remaining in place while escaping the framework of the attention economy and an over-reliance on a filtered public opinion.

This distinction also forms the basis for the idea of refusal-in-place, the subject of my third chapter. Taking a cue from Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener," who answers not "I will not" but "I would prefer not to," I look to the history of refusal for responses that protest the terms of the question itself. And I try to show how that creative space of refusal is threatened in a time of widespread economic precarity, when everyone from Amazon workers to college students see their margin of refusal shrinking, and the stakes for playing along growing. Thinking about what it takes to *afford* refusal, I suggest that learning to redirect and enlarge our attention may be the place to pry open the endless cycle between frightened, captive attention and economic insecurity.

Chapter 4 comes mainly from my experience as an artist and art educator long interested in how art can teach us new scales and tones of attention. I look both to art history and to vision studies to think about the relationship between attention and volition—how we might not only disentangle ourselves from the attention economy but learn to wield attention in a more intentional way. This chapter is also based on my personal experience learning about my bioregion for the first time, a new pattern of attention applied to the place I've lived in my entire life.

If we can use attention to inhabit a new plane of reality, it follows that we might meet each other there by paying attention to the same things and to each other. In Chapter 5, I examine and try to dissolve the limits that the "filter bubble" has placed on how we view the people around us. Then I'll ask you to stretch it even further, extending the same attention to the more-than-human world. Ultimately, I argue for a view of the self and of identity that is the opposite of the personal brand: an unstable, shapeshifting thing deter-

mined by interactions with others and with different kinds of places.

In the last chapter, I try to imagine a utopian social network that could somehow hold all of this. I use the lens of the human bodily need for spatial and temporal context to understand the violence of “context collapse” online and propose a kind of “context collection” in its place. Understanding that meaningful ideas require incubation time and space, I look both to noncommercial decentralized networks and the continued importance of private communication and in-person meetings. I suggest that we withdraw our attention and use it instead to restore the biological and cultural ecosystems where we forge meaningful identities, both individual and collective.

DURING THE SUMMER that I spent nearly every day writing this book, some friends joked about how I was working so hard on something called *How to Do Nothing*. But the real irony is that in writing something by this title, I inadvertently radicalized myself by learning the importance of *doing something*. In my capacity as an artist, I have always thought about attention, but it’s only now that I fully understand where a life of sustained attention leads. In short, it leads to awareness, not only of how lucky I am to be alive, but to ongoing patterns of cultural and ecological devastation around me—and the inescapable part that I play in it, should I choose to recognize it or not. In other words, simple awareness is the seed of responsibility.

At some point, I began to think of this as an activist book disguised as a self-help book. I’m not sure that it’s fully either. But as much as I hope this book has something to offer you, I also hope it has something to contribute to activism, mostly by providing a rest stop for those on their way to fight the good fight. I hope that the figure of “doing nothing” in opposition to a productivity-obsessed environment can help restore individuals who can then help restore communities, human and beyond. And most of all, I hope it can help people find ways of connecting that are substan-

tive, sustaining, and absolutely unprofitable to corporations, whose metrics and algorithms have never belonged in the conversations we have about our thoughts, our feelings, and our survival.

One thing I have learned about attention is that certain forms of it are contagious. When you spend enough time with someone who pays close attention to something (if you were hanging out with me, it would be birds), you inevitably start to pay attention to some of the same things. I’ve also learned that patterns of attention—what we choose to notice and what we do not—are how we render reality for ourselves, and thus have a direct bearing on what we feel is possible at any given time. These aspects, taken together, suggest to me the revolutionary potential of taking back our attention. To capitalist logic, which thrives on myopia and dissatisfaction, there may indeed be something dangerous about something as pedestrian as doing nothing: escaping laterally toward each other, we might just find that everything we wanted is already here.

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Chapter 1

The Case for Nothing

wakes up and looks at phone

ah let's see what fresh horrors await me on the fresh horrors device

—@MISSOKISTIC IN A TWEET ON NOVEMBER 10, 2016

In early 2017, not long after Trump's inauguration, I was asked to give a keynote talk at EYEO, an art and technology conference in Minneapolis. I was still reeling from the election and, like many other artists I knew, found it difficult to continue making anything at all. On top of that, Oakland was in a state of mourning following the 2016 Ghost Ship fire, which took the lives of many artists and community-minded people. Staring at the blank field in which I was supposed to enter my talk title, I thought about what I could possibly say that would be meaningful in a moment like this. Without yet knowing what the talk would actually be, I just typed in "How to Do Nothing."

After that, I decided to ground the talk in a specific place: the Morcom Amphitheatre of Roses in Oakland, California, otherwise known simply as the Rose Garden. I did that partly because it was in the Rose Garden that I began brainstorming my talk. But I had also realized that the garden encompassed everything I wanted to cover: the practice of doing nothing, the architecture of nothing, the importance of public space, and an ethics of care and maintenance.

I live five minutes away from the Rose Garden, and ever since I've lived in Oakland, it's been my default place to go to get away from my computer, where I do much of my work, art and other-

wise. But after the election, I started going to the Rose Garden almost every day. This wasn't exactly a conscious decision; it was more of an innate movement, like a deer going to a salt lick or a goat going to the top of a hill. What I would do there is nothing. I'd just sit there. And although I felt a bit guilty about how incongruous it seemed—beautiful garden versus terrifying world—it really did feel like a necessary survival tactic. I recognized the feeling in a passage from Gilles Deleuze in *Negotiations*:

We're riddled with pointless talk, insane quantities of words and images. Stupidity's never blind or mute. So it's not a problem of getting people to express themselves but of providing little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say. Repressive forces don't stop people expressing themselves but rather force them to express themselves; what a relief to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing, because only then is there a chance of framing the rare, and ever rarer, thing that might be worth saying.¹

He wrote that in 1985, but I could identify with the sentiment in 2016, almost to a painful degree. The function of nothing here—of saying nothing—is that it's a precursor to having something to say. "Nothing" is neither a luxury nor a waste of time, but rather a necessary part of meaningful thought and speech.

Of course, as a visual artist, I've long had an appreciation of doing nothing—or, more properly, making nothing. I had been known to do things like collect hundreds of screenshots of farms or chemical-waste ponds from Google Earth, cutting them out and arranging them in mandala-like compositions. In *The Bureau of Suspended Objects*, a project I did while in residence at Recology SF, I spent three months photographing, cataloging, and researching the origins of two hundred discarded objects. I presented them as a browsable archive in which people could scan a handmade tag next to each object and learn about its manufacturing, material, and cor-

porate history. At the opening, a confused and somewhat indignant woman turned to me and said, "Wait . . . so did you actually make anything? Or did you just put things on shelves?" I often say that my medium is context, so the answer was yes to both.

Part of the reason I work this way is because I find existing things infinitely more interesting than anything I could possibly make. *The Bureau of Suspended Objects* was really just an excuse for me to stare at the amazing things in the dump—a Nintendo Power Glove, a jumble of bicentennial-edition 7UP cans, a bank ledger from 1906—and to give each object the attention it was due. This near-paralyzing fascination with one's subject is something I've termed the "observational eros." There's something like it in the introduction of Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*, where he describes the patience and care involved in close observation of one's specimens:

When you collect marine animals there are certain flat worms so delicate that they are almost impossible to capture whole, for they break and tatter under the touch. You must let them ooze and crawl of their own will onto a knife blade and then lift them gently into your bottle of sea water. And perhaps that might be the way to write this book—to open the page and let the stories crawl in by themselves.²

Given this context, it's perhaps unsurprising that one of my favorite public art pieces was done by a documentary filmmaker. In 1973, Eleanor Coppola carried out a public art project called *Windows*, which materially speaking consisted only of a map with a date and a list of locations in San Francisco. Following Steinbeck's formula, the windows at each location were the bottle, and whatever happened behind them were the stories that "crawled in." Coppola's map reads:

Eleanor Coppola has designated a number of windows in all parts of San Francisco as visual landmarks. Her purpose in

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this project is to bring to the attention of the whole community, art that exists in its own context, where it is found, without being altered or removed to a gallery situation.³

I like to consider this piece in contrast with how we normally experience public art, which is some giant steel thing that looks like it landed in a corporate plaza from outer space. Coppola instead casts a subtle frame over the whole of the city itself, a light but meaningful touch that recognizes art that exists where it already is.

A more recent project that acts in a similar spirit is Scott Polach's *Applause Encouraged*, which happened at Cabrillo National Monument in San Diego in 2015. On a cliff overlooking the sea, forty-five minutes before the sunset, a greeter checked guests in to an area of foldout seats formally cordoned off with red rope. They were ushered to their seats and reminded not to take photos. They watched the sunset, and when it finished, they applauded. Refreshments were served afterward.

THESE LAST FEW projects have something important in common. In each, the artist creates a structure—whether that's a map or a cordoned-off area (or even a lowly set of shelves!)—that holds open a contemplative space against the pressures of habit, familiarity, and distraction that constantly threaten to close it. This attention-holding architecture is something I frequently think about at the Rose Garden. Far from your typical flat square garden with simple rows of roses, it sits into a hill, with an endlessly branching system of paths and stairways through and around the roses, trellises, and oak trees. I've observed that everyone moves very slowly, and yes, people do quite literally stop and smell the roses. There are probably a hundred possible ways to wind your way through the garden, and just as many places to sit. Architecturally, the Rose Garden wants you to stay awhile.

You can see this effect at work in the circular labyrinths that

are designed for nothing other than contemplative walking. Labyrinths function similarly to how they appear, enabling a sort of dense infolding of attention; through two-dimensional design alone, they make it possible not to walk straight through a space, nor to stand still, but something very well in between. I find myself gravitating toward these kinds of spaces—libraries, small museums, gardens, columbaria—because of the way they unfold secret and multifarious perspectives even within a fairly small area.

But of course, this infolding of attention doesn't need to be spatialized or visual. For an auditory example, I look to *Deep Listening*, the legacy of the musician and composer Pauline Oliveros. Classically trained in composition, Oliveros was teaching experimental music at UC San Diego in the 1970s. She began developing participatory group techniques—such as performances where people listened to and improvised responses to each other and the ambient sound environment—as a way of working with sound that could bring some inner peace amid the violence and unrest of the Vietnam War.

Deep Listening was one of those techniques. Oliveros defines the practice as “listening in every possible way to every thing possible to hear no matter what you are doing. Such intense listening includes the sounds of daily life, of nature, of one's own thoughts as well as musical sounds.”⁴ She distinguished between listening and hearing: “To hear is the physical means that enables perception. To listen is to give attention to what is perceived both acoustically and psychologically.”⁵ The goal and the reward of Deep Listening was a heightened sense of receptivity and a reversal of our usual cultural training, which teaches us to quickly analyze and judge more than to simply observe.

When I learned about Deep Listening, I realized I had unwittingly been practicing it for a while—only in the context of bird-watching. In fact, I've always found it funny that it's called bird-watching, because half if not more of bird-watching is actually bird-listening. (I personally think they should just rename it “bird-noticing.”) However you refer to it, what this practice has

in common with Deep Listening is that observing birds requires you quite literally to do nothing. Bird-watching is the opposite of looking something up online. You can't really look *for* birds; you can't make a bird come out and identify itself to you. The most you can do is walk quietly and wait until you hear something, and then stand motionless under a tree, using your animal senses to figure out where and what it is.

What amazed and humbled me about bird-watching was the way it changed the granularity of my perception, which had been pretty "low-res." At first, I just noticed birdsong more. Of course it had been there all along, but now that I was paying attention to it, I realized that it was almost everywhere, all day, all the time. And then, one by one, I started learning each song and associating it with a bird, so that now when I walk into the Rose Garden, I inadvertently acknowledge them in my head as though they were people: "Hi, raven, robin, song sparrow, chickadee, goldfinch, towhee, hawk, nuthatch . . ." and so on. The sounds have become so familiar to me that I no longer strain to identify them; they register instead like speech. This might sound familiar to anyone who has ever learned another (human) language as an adult. Indeed, the diversification of what was previously "bird sounds"—into discrete sounds that mean something to me—is something I can only compare to the moment that I realized that my mom spoke three languages, not two.

My mom has only ever spoken English to me, and for a very long time, I assumed that whenever my mom was speaking to another Filipino person, she was speaking Tagalog. I didn't really have a good reason for thinking this other than that I knew she did speak Tagalog and it sort of all sounded like Tagalog to me. But my mom was only sometimes speaking Tagalog. Other times she was speaking Ilonggo, which is a completely different language that is specific to where she's from in the Philippines. The languages are not the same, i.e., one is not simply a dialect of the other; in fact, the Philippines is full of language groups that, according to my mom,

have so little in common that speakers would not be able to understand each other, and Tagalog is only one.

This type of embarrassing discovery, in which something you thought was one thing is actually two things, and each of those two things is actually ten things, seems like a simple function of the duration and quality of one's attention. With effort, we can become attuned to things, able to pick up and then hopefully differentiate finer and finer frequencies each time.

THERE'S SOMETHING IMPORTANT that the moment of stopping to listen has in common with the labyrinthine quality of attention-holding architecture: in their own ways, each enacts some kind of interruption, a removal from the sphere of familiarity. Every time I see or hear an unusual bird, time stops, and later I wonder where I was, just as wandering some unexpected secret passageway can feel like dropping out of linear time. Even if brief or momentary, these places and moments are retreats, and like longer retreats, they affect the way we see everyday life when we do come back to it.

The location of the Rose Garden—when it was built in the 1930s—was specifically chosen because of the natural bowl shape of the land. The space feels physically and acoustically enclosed, remarkably separate from everything around it. When you sit in the Rose Garden, you truly sit *in* it. Likewise, labyrinths of any kind, by virtue of their shape, collect our attention into these small circular spaces. When Rebecca Solnit, in her book *Wanderlust*, wrote about walking in the labyrinth inside the Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, she found herself barely in the city at all: "The circuit was so absorbing I lost sight of the people nearby and hardly heard the sound of the traffic and the bells for six o'clock."⁶

This isn't a new idea, and it also applies over longer periods of time. Most people have, or have known someone who has, gone through some period of "removal" that fundamentally changed their attitude to the world they returned to. Sometimes that's occa-

sioned by something terrible, like illness or loss, and sometimes it's voluntary, but regardless, that pause in time is often the only thing that can precipitate change on a certain scale.

One of our most famous observers, John Muir, had just such an experience. Before becoming the naturalist that we know him as, he worked as a supervisor and sometimes-inventor in a wagon wheel factory. (I suspect that he was a man concerned with productivity, since one of his inventions was a study desk that was also an alarm clock and timer, which would open up books for an allotted amount of time, close them, and then open the next book.) Muir had already developed a love of botany, but it was being temporarily blinded by an eye accident that made him re-evaluate his priorities. The accident confined him to a darkened room for six weeks, during which he was unsure whether he would ever see again.

The 1916 edition of *The Writings of John Muir* is divided into two parts, one before the accident and one after, each with its own introduction by William Frederic Badè. In the second introduction, Badè writes that this period of reflection convinced Muir that "life was too brief and uncertain, and time too precious, to waste upon belts and saws; that while he was pottering in a wagon factory, God was making a world; and he determined that, if his eyesight was spared, he would devote the remainder of his life to a study of the process."⁷ Muir himself said, "This affliction has driven me to the sweet fields."⁸

As it turns out, my dad went through his own period of removal when he was my age and working as a technician in the Bay Area. He'd gotten fed up with his job and figured he had enough saved up to quit and live extremely cheaply for a while. That ended up being two years. When I asked him how he spent those years, he said he read a lot, rode his bike, studied math and electronics, went fishing, had long chats with his friend and roommate, and sat in the hills, where he taught himself the flute. After a while, he says, he realized that a lot of his anger about his job and out-

side circumstances had more to do with him than he realized. As he put it, "It's just you with yourself and your own crap, so you have to deal with it." But that time also taught my dad about creativity, and the state of openness, and maybe even the boredom or nothingness, that it requires. I'm reminded of a 1991 lecture by John Cleese (of Monty Python) on creativity, in which two of the five required factors he lists are time:

1. Space
2. Time
3. Time
4. Confidence
5. Humor⁹

And so at the end of this stretch of open time, my dad looked around for another job and realized that the one he'd had was actually pretty good. Luckily for him, they welcomed him back without hesitation. But also, because he'd discovered what was necessary for his own creativity, things weren't exactly the same the second time around. With renewed energy and a different perspective on his job, he went from technician to engineer, and has filed around twelve patents so far. To this day, he insists that he comes up with all of his best ideas on the top of a hill after a long bike ride.

This got me thinking that perhaps the granularity of attention we achieve outward also extends inward, so that as the perceptual details of our environment unfold in surprising ways, so too do our own intricacies and contradictions. My dad said that leaving the confined context of a job made him understand himself not in relation to that world, but just to the world, and forever after that, things that happened at work only seemed like one small part of something much larger. It reminds me of how John Muir described himself not as a naturalist but as a "poetico-trampo-geologist-botanist and ornithologist-naturalist etc. etc.," or of how Pauline Oliveros described herself in 1974:

Pauline Oliveros is a two legged human being, female, lesbian, musician, and composer among other things which contribute to her identity. She is herself and lives with her partner . . . along with assorted poultry, dogs, cats, rabbits and tropical hermit crabs.¹⁰

Of course, there's an obvious critique of all of this, and that's that it comes from a place of privilege. I can go to the Rose Garden, stare into trees, and sit on hills all the time because I have a teaching job that only requires me to be on campus two days a week, not to mention a whole set of other privileges. Part of the reason my dad could take that time off was that on some level, he had cause to think he could get another job. It's very possible to understand the practice of doing nothing solely as a self-indulgent luxury, the equivalent of taking a mental health day, if you're lucky enough to work at a place that has those.

But here I come back to Deleuze's "right to say nothing," and just because this right is denied to many people doesn't make it any less of a right or any less important. As far back as 1886, decades before it would finally be guaranteed, workers in the United States pushed for an eight-hour workday: "eight hours of work, eight hours of rest, and eight hours of what we will." The famous graphic by the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions shows this motto corresponding to three sections of the day: a textile worker at her station, a sleeping person's feet sticking out of a blanket, and a couple sitting in a boat on a lake, reading a union newspaper.

The movement also had its own song:

*We mean to make things over;
we're tired of toil for naught
but bare enough to live on:
never an hour for thought.*

*We want to feel the sunshine;
we want to smell the flowers;
We're sure that God has willed it,
and we mean to have eight hours.*

*We're summoning our forces
from shipyard, shop and mill:
Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest,
eight hours for what we will!¹¹*

Here, I'm struck by the types of things associated with the category "what we will": rest, thought, flowers, sunshine. These are bodily, human things, and this bodily-ness is something I will come back to. When Samuel Gompers, who led the labor group that organized this particular iteration of the eight-hour movement, gave an address titled "What Does Labor Want?" the answer he arrived at was, "It wants the earth and the fullness thereof."¹² And to me it seems significant that it's not eight hours of, say, "leisure" or "education," but "eight hours of what we will." Although leisure or education might be involved, the most humane way to describe that period is to refuse to define it.

That campaign was about a demarcation of time. So it's interesting, and certainly troubling, to understand the decline in labor unions in the last several decades alongside a similar decline in the demarcation of public space. True public spaces, the most obvious examples being parks and libraries, are places for—and thus the spatial underpinnings of—"what we will." A public, noncommercial space demands nothing from you in order for you to enter, nor for you to stay; the most obvious difference between public space and other spaces is that you don't have to buy anything, or pretend to want to buy something, to be there.

Consider an actual city park in contrast to a faux public space like Universal CityWalk, which one passes through upon leaving the Universal Studios theme park. Because it interfaces between

the theme park and the actual city, CityWalk exists somewhere in between, almost like a movie set, where visitors can consume the supposed diversity of an urban environment while enjoying a feeling of safety that results from its actual homogeneity. In an essay about such spaces, Eric Holding and Sarah Chaplin call CityWalk “a ‘scripted space’ par excellence, that is, a space which excludes, directs, supervises, constructs, and orchestrates use.”¹³ Anyone who has ever tried any funny business in a faux public space knows that such spaces do not just script actions, they police them. In a public space, ideally, you are a citizen with agency; in a faux public space, you are either a consumer or a threat to the design of the place.

The Rose Garden is a public space. It is a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project from the 1930s, and like all WPA projects, was built by people put to work by the federal government during the Depression. I’m reminded of its beginnings every time I see its dignified architecture: that this rose garden, an incredible public good, came out of a program that itself was also a public good. Still, it wasn’t surprising to me to find out recently that the Rose Garden is in an area that almost got turned into condos in the seventies. I’m appalled, but not surprised. I’m also not surprised that it took a concerted effort by local residents to have the area rezoned to prevent that from happening. That’s because this kind of thing always seems to be happening: those spaces deemed commercially unproductive are always under threat, since what they “produce” can’t be measured or exploited or even easily identified—despite the fact that anyone in the neighborhood can tell you what an immense value the garden provides.

Currently, I see a similar battle playing out for our time, a colonization of the self by capitalist ideas of productivity and efficiency. One might say the parks and libraries of the self are always about to be turned into condos. In *After the Future*, the Marxist theorist Franco “Bifo” Berardi ties the defeat of labor movements in the eighties to the rise of the idea that we should all be entrepreneurs. In the past, he notes, economic risk was the business of the capitalist,

the investor. Today, though, “we are all capitalists’ . . . and therefore, we all have to take risks . . . The essential idea is that we should all consider life as an economic venture, as a race where there are winners and losers.”¹⁴

The way that Berardi describes labor will sound as familiar to anyone concerned with their personal brand as it will to any Uber driver, content moderator, hard-up freelancer, aspiring YouTube star, or adjunct professor who drives to three campuses in one week:

In the global digital network, labor is transformed into small parcels of nervous energy picked up by the recombining machine . . . The workers are deprived of every individual consistency. Strictly speaking, the workers no longer exist. **Their time exists, their time is there, permanently available to connect**, to produce in exchange for a temporary salary.¹⁵ (emphasis mine)

The removal of economic security for working people dissolves those boundaries—eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will—so that we are left with twenty-four potentially monetizable hours that are sometimes not even restricted to our time zones or our sleep cycles.

In a situation where every waking moment has become the time in which we make our living, and when we submit even our leisure for numerical evaluation via likes on Facebook and Instagram, constantly checking on its performance like one checks a stock, monitoring the ongoing development of our personal brand, time becomes an economic resource that we can no longer justify spending on “nothing.” It provides no return on investment; it is simply too expensive. This is a cruel confluence of time and space: just as we lose noncommercial spaces, we also see all of our own time and our actions as potentially commercial. Just as public space gives way to faux public retail spaces or weird corporate privatized parks,

so we are sold the idea of compromised leisure, a freemium leisure that is a very far cry from “what we will.”

In 2017, while I was an artist in residence at the Internet Archive in San Francisco, I spent a lot of time going through the ads in old issues of *BYTE*, a 1980s-era hobbyist computing magazine. Among unintentionally surreal images—a hard drive plugged into an apple, a man arm wrestling with his desktop computer, or a California gold miner holding up a pan of computer chips and saying, “Eureka!”—I came across a lot of ads about computers whose main point was that they were going to save you time working. My favorite was an ad by NEC, whose motto was “Taking it to the limit.” The ad, titled “Power Lunch,” shows a man at home, typing on a computer whose screen shows a bar graph of increasing values. He drinks a small carton of milk, but his sandwich is untouched. Taking it to the limit indeed.

Part of what’s so painful about this image is that we know how this story ends; yes, it did get easier to work. From anywhere. All the time! For an extreme example, look no further than Fiverr, a microtasking site where users sell various tasks—basically, units of their time—for five dollars each. Those tasks could be anything: copyediting, filming a video of themselves doing something of your choice, or pretending to be your girlfriend on Facebook. To me, Fiverr is the ultimate expression of Franco Berardi’s “fractals of time and pulsating cells of labor.”⁶

In 2017, Fiverr ran a similar ad to NEC’s “Power Lunch,” but missing the lunch. In this one, a gaunt twenty-something stares dead-eyed into the camera, accompanied by the following text: “You eat a coffee for lunch. You follow through on your follow-through. Sleep deprivation is your drug of choice. You might be a doer.” Here, the idea that you would even withhold some of that time to sustain yourself with food is essentially ridiculed. In a *New Yorker* article aptly titled “The Gig Economy Celebrates Working Yourself to Death,” Jia Tolentino concludes after reading a Fiverr press release: “This is the jargon through which the essentially cannibalistic na-

ture of the gig economy is dressed up as an aesthetic. No one wants to eat coffee for lunch or go on a bender of sleep deprivation—or answer a call from a client while having sex, as recommended in [Fiverr’s promotional] video.”⁷ When every moment is a moment you could be working, power lunch becomes power lifestyle.

Though it finds its baldest expression in things like the Fiverr ads, this phenomenon—of work metastasizing throughout the rest of life—isn’t constrained to the gig economy. I learned this during the few years that I worked in the marketing department of a large clothing brand. The office had instituted something called the Results Only Work Environment, or ROWE, which meant to abolish the eight-hour workday by letting you work whenever from wherever, as long as you got your work done. It sounded noble enough, but there was something in the name that bothered me. After all, what is the *E* in ROWE? If you could be getting results at the office, in your car, at the store, at home after dinner—aren’t those all then “work environments”? At that time, in 2011, I’d managed not to get a phone with email yet, and with the introduction of this new workday, I put off getting one even longer. I knew exactly what would happen the minute I did: that every minute of every day I would in fact be answerable to someone, even if my leash was a lot longer.

Our required reading, *Why Work Sucks and How to Fix It: The Results-Only Revolution*, by the creators of ROWE, seemed well intended, as the authors attempted to describe a merciful slackening of the “be in your chair from nine to five” model. But I was nonetheless troubled by how the work and non-work selves are completely conflated throughout the text. They write:

If you can have your time and work and live and be a person, then the question you’re faced with every day isn’t, Do I really have to go to work today? but, How do I contribute to this thing called life? What can I do today to benefit my family, my company, myself?⁸

To me, "company" doesn't belong in that sentence. Even if you love your job! Unless there's something specifically about you or your job that requires it, there is nothing to be admired about being constantly connected, constantly potentially productive the second you open your eyes in the morning—and in my opinion, no one should accept this, not now, not ever. In the words of Othello: "Leave me but a little to myself."

This constant connection—and the difficulty of maintaining any kind of silence or interiority—is already a problem, but after the 2016 election it seemed to take on new dimensions. I was seeing that the means by which we give over our hours and days are the same with which we assault ourselves with information and misinformation, at a frankly inhumane rate. Obviously the solution is not to stop reading the news, or even what other people have to say about that news, but we could use a moment to examine the relationship between attention span and the speed of information exchange.

Berardi, contrasting modern-day Italy with the political agitations of the 1970s, says the regime he inhabits "is not founded on the repression of dissent; nor does it rest on the enforcement of silence. On the contrary, it relies on the proliferation of chatter, the irrelevance of opinion and discourse, and on making thought, dissent, and critique banal and ridiculous." Instances of censorship, he says, "are rather marginal when compared to what is essentially an immense informational overload and an actual siege of attention, combined with the occupation of the sources of information by the head of the company."⁹

It is this *financially incentivized* proliferation of chatter, and the utter speed at which waves of hysteria now happen online, that has so deeply horrified me and offended my senses and cognition as a human who dwells in human, bodily time. The connection between the completely virtual and the utterly real, as evidenced by something like Pizzagate, or the doxing and swatting of online journalists, is deeply, fundamentally disturbing on a human

phenomenological level. I know that in the months after the election, a lot of people found themselves searching for this thing called "truth," but what I also felt to be missing was just reality, something I could point to after all of this and say, *This is really real*.

IN THE MIDDLE of this postelection heartbreak and anxiety, I was still looking at birds. Not just any birds, and not even a species, but a few specific individuals. First, it was a couple of black-crowned night herons that reliably perch outside of a KFC in my neighborhood, almost all day and night. If you've never seen one, night herons are stocky compared to other herons. My boyfriend once described them as a cross between a penguin and Paul Giamatti. They have a grumpy stoicism about them, sitting hunched over with their long neck completely hidden away. I sometimes affectionately refer to these birds as "the colonels" (because of their location) or "my precious footballs" (because of their shape).

Without really thinking about it, I modified my path home from the bus to pass by the night herons whenever I could, just to be reassured by their presence. I remember specifically feeling comforted by the presence of these strange birds, like I could look up from the horrifying maelstrom of that day's Twitter and they'd probably be there, unmoving with their formidable beaks and their laser-red eyes. (In fact, I even found them sitting in the same place on 2011 Google Street View, and I have no doubt they were there earlier, but Street View doesn't go back any further.) The KFC is near Lake Merritt, a man-made lake in a completely developed area that, like much of the East Bay and the Peninsula, used to be the type of wetlands that herons and other shorebirds love. Night herons have existed here since before Oakland was a city, holdovers from that marshier time. Knowing this made the KFC night herons begin to seem like ghosts to me, especially at night when the streetlights would make their white bellies glow from below.

One of the reasons the night herons are still here is that, like

crows, they don't mind humans, traffic, or the occasional piece of trash for dinner. And indeed, crows were the other birds I had started paying more attention to. I had just finished reading Jennifer Ackerman's *The Genius of Birds* and had learned that crows are incredibly intelligent (in the way that humans measure intelligence, anyway) and can recognize and remember human faces. They have been documented making and using tools in the wild. They can also teach their children who are the "good" and "bad" humans—good being ones who feed them and bad being ones who try to catch them or otherwise displease them. They can hold grudges for years. I'd seen crows all my life, but now I became curious about the ones in my neighborhood.

My apartment has a balcony, so I started leaving a few peanuts out on it for the crows. For a long time the peanuts just stayed there and I felt like a crazy person. And then once in a while I'd notice that one was gone, but I couldn't be sure who took it. Then a couple times I saw a crow come by and swipe one, but it wouldn't stay. And this went on for a while until finally they began hanging out on a telephone wire nearby. One started coming every day around the time that I eat breakfast, sitting exactly where I could see it from the kitchen table, and it would caw to make me come out on the balcony with a peanut. Then one day it brought its kid, which I knew was its kid because the big one would groom the smaller one and because the smaller one had an undeveloped, chicken-like squawk. I named them Crow and Crowson.

I soon discovered that Crow and Crowson preferred it when I threw peanuts off the balcony so they could do fancy dives off the telephone line. They'd do twists, barrel rolls, and loops, which I made slow-motion videos of with the obsessiveness of a proud parent. Sometimes they wouldn't want any more peanuts and would just sit there and stare at me. One time Crowson followed me halfway down the street. And frankly, I spent a lot of time staring back at them, to the point that I wondered what the neighbors might think. But again, like the night herons, I found their company com-

forting, somehow extremely so given the circumstances. It was comforting that these essentially wild animals recognized me, that I had some place in their universe, and that even though I had no idea what they did the rest of the day, that they would (and still do) stop by my place every day—that sometimes I can even wave them over from a faraway tree.

Inevitably, I began to wonder what these birds see when they look at me. I assume they just see a human who for some reason pays attention to them. They don't know what my work is, they don't see progress—they just see recurrence, day after day, week after week. And through them, I am able to inhabit that perspective, to see myself as the human animal that I am, and when they fly off, to some extent, I can inhabit that perspective too, noticing the shape of the hill that I live on and where all of the tall trees and good landing spots are. I noticed that some ravens live half in and half out of the Rose Garden, until I realized that there is no "rose garden" to them. These alien animal perspectives on me and our shared world have provided me not only with an escape hatch from contemporary anxiety but also a reminder of my own animality and the animateness of the world I live in. Their flights enable my own literal flights of fancy, recalling a question that one of my favorite authors, David Abram, asks in *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*: "Do we really believe that the human imagination can sustain itself without being startled by other shapes of sentience?"²⁰

Strange as it sounds, this explained my need to go to the Rose Garden after the election. What was missing from that surreal and terrifying torrent of information and virtuality was any regard, any place, for the human animal, situated as she is in time and in a physical environment with other human and nonhuman entities. It turns out that groundedness requires *actual ground*. "Direct sensuous reality," writes Abram, "in all its more-than-human mystery, remains the sole solid touchstone for an experiential world now inundated with electronically generated vistas and engineered pleasures; only in regular contact with the tangible ground and sky can

we learn how to orient and to navigate in the multiple dimensions that now claim us.”²¹

When I realized this, I grabbed on to it like a life raft, and I haven’t let go. *This* is real. Your eyes reading this text, your hands, your breath, the time of day, the place where you are reading this—these things are real. I’m real too. I am not an avatar, a set of preferences, or some smooth cognitive force; I’m lumpy and porous, I’m an animal, I hurt sometimes, and I’m different one day to the next. I hear, see, and smell things in a world where others also hear, see, and smell me. And it takes a break to remember that: a break to do nothing, to just listen, to remember in the deepest sense *what*, *when*, and *where* we are.

I WANT TO be clear that I’m not actually encouraging anyone to stop doing things completely. In fact, I think that “doing nothing”—in the sense of refusing productivity and stopping to listen—entails an active process of listening that seeks out the effects of racial, environmental, and economic injustice and brings about real change. I consider “doing nothing” both as a kind of deprogramming device and as sustenance for those feeling too disassembled to act meaningfully. On this level, the practice of doing nothing has several tools to offer us when it comes to resisting the attention economy.

The first tool has to do with repair. In such times as these, having recourse to periods of and spaces for “doing nothing” is of utmost importance, because without them we have no way to think, reflect, heal, and sustain ourselves—individually or collectively. There is a kind of nothing that’s necessary for, at the end of the day, doing something. When overstimulation has become a fact of life, I suggest that we reimagine #FOMO as #NOMO, the necessity of missing out, or if that bothers you, #NOSMO, the necessity of sometimes missing out.

That’s a strategic function of nothing, and in that sense, you could file what I’ve said so far under the heading of self-care. But if you do, make it “self-care” in the activist sense that Audre Lorde

meant it in the 1980s, when she said that “[c]aring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” This is an important distinction to make these days, when the phrase “self-care” is appropriated for commercial ends and risks becoming a cliché. As Gabrielle Moss, author of *Glop: Nontoxic, Expensive Ideas That Will Make You Look Ridiculous and Feel Pretentious* (a book parodying goop, Gwyneth Paltrow’s high-priced wellness empire), put it: self-care “is poised to be wrenched away from activists and turned into an excuse to buy an expensive bath oil.”²²

The second tool that doing nothing offers us is a sharpened ability to listen. I’ve already mentioned Deep Listening, but this time I mean it in the broader sense of understanding one another. To do nothing is to hold yourself still so that you can perceive what is actually there. As Gordon Hempton, an acoustic ecologist who records natural soundscapes, put it: “Silence is not the absence of something but the presence of everything.”²³ Unfortunately, our constant engagement with the attention economy means that this is something many of us (myself included) may have to relearn. Even with the problem of the filter bubble aside, the platforms that we use to communicate with each other do not encourage listening. Instead they reward shouting and oversimple reaction: of having a “take” after having read a single headline.

I alluded earlier to the problem of speed, but this is also a problem both of listening and of bodies. There is in fact a connection between 1) listening in the Deep Listening, bodily sense, and 2) listening, as in me understanding your perspective. Writing about the circulation of information, Berardi makes a distinction that’s especially helpful here, between what he calls connectivity and sensitivity. Connectivity is the rapid circulation of information among compatible units—an example would be an article racking up a bunch of shares very quickly and unthinkingly by like-minded people on Facebook. With connectivity, you either are or are not compatible. Red or blue: check the box. In this transmission of information, the units don’t change, nor does the information.

Sensitivity, in contrast, involves a difficult, awkward, ambiguous encounter between two differently shaped bodies that are themselves ambiguous—and this meeting, this sensing, requires and takes place in time. Not only that, due to the effort of sensing, the two entities might come away from the encounter a bit different than they went in. Thinking about sensitivity reminds me of a monthlong artist residency I once attended with two other artists in an extremely remote location in the Sierra Nevada. There wasn't much to do at night, so one of the artists and I would sometimes sit on the roof and watch the sunset. She was Catholic and from the Midwest; I'm sort of the quintessential California atheist. I have really fond memories of the languid, meandering conversations we had up there about science and religion. And what strikes me is that neither of us ever convinced the other—that wasn't the point—but we listened to each other, and we did each come away different, with a more nuanced understanding of the other person's position.

So connectivity is a share or, conversely, a trigger; sensitivity is an in-person conversation, whether pleasant or difficult, or both. Obviously, online platforms favor connectivity, not simply by virtue of being online, but also arguably for profit, since the difference between connectivity and sensitivity is time, and time is money. Again, too expensive.

As the body disappears, so does our ability to empathize. Berardi suggests a link between our senses and our ability to make sense, asking us to “hypothesize the connection between the expansion of the infosphere . . . and the crumbling of the sensory membrane that allows human beings to understand that which cannot be verbalized, that which cannot be reduced to codified signs.”²⁴ In the environment of our online platforms, “that which cannot be verbalized” is figured as excess or incompatible, although every in-person encounter teaches us the importance of nonverbal expressions of the body, not to mention the very matter-of-fact presence of the body in front of me.

BUT BEYOND SELF-CARE and the ability to (really) listen, the practice of doing nothing has something broader to offer us: an antidote to the rhetoric of growth. In the context of health and ecology, things that grow unchecked are often considered parasitic or cancerous. Yet we inhabit a culture that privileges novelty and growth over the cyclical and the regenerative. Our very idea of productivity is premised on the idea of producing something new, whereas we do not tend to see maintenance and care as productive in the same way.

This is the place to mention a few regulars of the Rose Garden. Besides Rose the wild turkey and Grayson the cat (who will sit on your book if you're trying to read), you are always likely to see a few of the park's volunteers doing maintenance. Their presence is a reminder that the Rose Garden is beautiful in part because it is cared for, that effort must be put in, whether that's saving it from becoming condos or just making sure the roses come back next year. The volunteers do such a good job that I often see park visitors walk up to them and thank them for what they're doing.

When I see them pulling weeds and arranging hoses, I often think of the artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Her well-known pieces include *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside*, a performance in which she washed the steps of the Wadsworth Atheneum, and *Touch Sanitation Performance*, in which she spent eleven months shaking hands with and thanking New York City's 8,500 sanitation men, in addition to interviewing and shadowing them. She has in fact been a permanent artist in residence with the New York City Sanitation Department since 1977.

Ukeles's interest in maintenance was partly occasioned by her becoming a mother in the 1960s. In an interview, she explained, “Being a mother entails an enormous amount of repetitive tasks. I became a maintenance worker. I felt completely abandoned by my culture because it didn't have a way to incorporate sustaining

work." In 1969, she wrote the "Manifesto for Maintenance Art", an exhibition proposal in which she considers her own maintenance work as the art. She says, "I will live in the museum and do what I customarily do at home with my husband and my baby, for the duration of the exhibition . . . My working will be the work."²⁵ Her manifesto opens with a distinction between what she calls the death force and the life force:

I. IDEAS

A. The Death Instinct and the Life Instinct:

The Death Instinct: separation, individuality, Avant-Garde par excellence; to follow one's own path—do your own thing; dynamic change.

The Life Instinct: unification; the eternal return; the perpetuation and MAINTENANCE of the species; survival systems and operations, equilibrium.²⁶

The life force is concerned with cyclicity, care, and regeneration; the death force sounds to me a lot like "disrupt." Obviously, some amount of both is necessary, but one is routinely valorized, not to mention masculinized, while the other goes unrecognized because it has no part in "progress."

That brings me to one last surprising aspect of the Rose Garden, which I first noticed on the central promenade. Set into the concrete on either side are a series of numbers in the tens, each signifying a decade, and within each decade are ten plaques with the names of various women. As it turns out, the names are of women who were voted Mother of the Year by Oakland residents. To be Mother of the Year, you must have "contributed to improving the quality of life for the people of Oakland—through home, work, community service, volunteer efforts or combination thereof."²⁷ In an old industry film about Oakland, I found footage of a Mother of the Year

ceremony from the 1950s. After a series of close-ups on different roses, someone hands a bouquet to an elderly woman and kisses her on the forehead. And for a few days this last May, I noticed an unusual number of volunteers in the garden, sprucing everything up, repainting things. It took me a while to realize they were preparing for Mother of the Year 2017, Malia Luisa Latu Saulala, a local church volunteer.

I'm mentioning this celebration of mothers in the context of work that sustains and maintains—but I don't think that one needs to be a mother to experience a maternal impulse. At the end of *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*, the stunning 2018 documentary on Fred Rogers (aka Mister Rogers), we learn that in his commencement speeches, Rogers would ask the audience to sit and think about someone who had helped them, believed in them, and wanted the best for them. The filmmakers then ask the interviewees to do this. For the first time, the voices we've been hearing for the past hour or so fall silent; the film cuts between different interviewees, each thinking, looking slightly off camera. Judging from the amount of sniffing in the theater where I saw this film, many in the audience were also thinking of their own mothers, fathers, siblings, friends. Rogers's point in the commencement speeches was made anew: we are all familiar with the phenomenon of selfless care from at least some part of our lives. This phenomenon is no exception; it is at the core of what defines the human experience.

Thinking about maintenance and care for one's kin also brings me back to a favorite book, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*, in which Rebecca Solnit dispenses with the myth that people become desperate and selfish after disasters. From the 1906 San Francisco earthquake to Hurricane Katrina, she gives detailed accounts of the surprising resourcefulness, empathy, and sometimes even humor that arise in dark circumstances. Several of her interviewees report feeling a strange nostalgia for the purposefulness and the connection they felt with their neighbors immediately following a disaster. Solnit

suggests that the real disaster is everyday life, which alienates us from each other and from the protective impulse that we harbor.

And as my familiarity with and love for the crows grows over the years, I'm reminded that we don't even need to limit this sense of kinship to the human realm. In her essay "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," Donna J. Haraway reminds us that *relatives* in British English meant "logical relations" until the seventeenth century, when they became "family members." Haraway is less interested in individuals and genealogical families than in symbiotic configurations of different kinds of beings maintained through the practice of care—asking us to "make kin, not babies!" Citing Shakespeare's punning between "kin" and "kind," she writes, "I think that the stretch and recombination of kin are allowed by the fact that all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages (not species one at a time). Kin is an assembling sort of word."²⁸

Gathering all this together, what I'm suggesting is that we take a protective stance toward ourselves, each other, and whatever is left of what makes us human—including the alliances that sustain and surprise us. I'm suggesting that we protect our *spaces* and our *time* for non-instrumental, noncommercial activity and thought, for maintenance, for care, for conviviality. And I'm suggesting that we fiercely protect our human animality against all technologies that actively ignore and disdain the body, the bodies of other beings, and the body of the landscape that we inhabit. In *Becoming Animal*, Abram writes that "all our technological utopias and dreams of machine-mediated immortality may fire our minds but they cannot feed our bodies. Indeed, most of this era's transcendent technological visions remain motivated by a fright of the body and its myriad susceptibilities, by a fear of our carnal embedment in a world ultimately beyond our control—by our terror of the very wildness that nourishes and sustains us."²⁹

Certain people would like to use technology to live longer, or forever. Ironically, this desire perfectly illustrates the death drive at play in the "Manifesto of Maintenance Art" ("separation, individuality, Avant-Garde par excellence; to follow one's own path—do your own thing; dynamic change")³⁰. To such people I humbly propose a far more parsimonious way to live forever: to exit the trajectory of productive time, so that a single moment might open almost to infinity. As John Muir once said, "Longest is the life that contains the largest amount of time-effacing enjoyment."

Of course, such a solution isn't good for business, nor can it be considered particularly innovative. But in the long meantime, as I sit in the deep bowl of the Rose Garden, surrounded by various human and nonhuman bodies, inhabiting a reality interwoven by myriad bodily sensitivities besides my own—indeed, the very boundaries of my own body overcome by the smell of jasmine and just-ripening blackberry—I look down at my phone and wonder if it isn't its own kind of sensory-deprivation chamber. That tiny, glowing world of metrics cannot compare to this one, which speaks to me instead in breezes, light and shadow, and the unruly, indescribable detail of the real.