

Folding in

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Abstract

This text explores design and nature, human centredness, the limits to human knowledge and nature's own agency as the unfolding of an approach to design that is embedded in the world in which we live. It does this with reference to wildflowers, insects, hares and building a den. These things are explored as cues to start designing the fashion system in other ways, specifically those that foster mutualism and interdependence.

Since early spring I've been eating every meal outside. This is a habit I've been cultivating for the last five years since I spent a fortnight on board a sailing boat in the Western Isles of Scotland. On the boat I couldn't bear to miss a thing and so I decamped to deck, the outdoors becoming the dining room of choice. Truth be told, I also couldn't see a thing below. In the space of two days, I went from being blissfully sharp in my focus of the world both near and far, to being unable to see myself in the mirror. I couldn't thread a needle, read a word. I was suddenly longsighted. Caused perhaps by gazing endlessly at the distant ocean (later I found out that this happened to many others before me). The sky was luminous midsummer. Seabird colonies dripped from island cliffs. The ocean writhed with whirlpools and showed dolphins, phosphorescent creatures, fish. When I got over the awkwardness, I borrowed a spare pair of the skipper's ready specs. But the sea's legacy is, for me, a permanent physical reminder of the need to look long. To seek out other perspectives, underlying patterns, gathering relationships and subtle changes in surroundings; and this in order also to better understand the conditions close by. I like to think that I might have always done this, but longsightedness has lent this task an uncommon edge, for it is now the clearest vision I have. And eating outside helps.

My lunch today was a sandwich and I ate it whilst sitting on a folding deckchair in the narrow corridor of wildflower meadow at the back of our house. The meadow is easily the best gardening I have ever done. On poor soil I sowed a mixture of native flower and grass seed in handfuls from a deep fold in my skirt. As I did it, I caught myself with a laugh, a moment of consciousness of taking part in an age-old task: shaping my arms and broadcasting seed as humans have for millennia. It's the same feeling I have when dragging bundles of firewood, firing an arrow. A mix of instinct and recognition. I almost ran upstairs for a scarf to tie back my hair.

As I ate I watched the bees. There are so many this year, especially bumbles, that watching them leaves me feeling slightly frantic. Early in the spring, the meadow was mainly flowered with ribwort plantain. Plantain throws up tan-coloured slender tubes, rising to about knee height, each with white petals in a halo. It grows in cracks

in the pavement, on waste ground; it's not exactly a plant to write home about. But for bees, it's the cat's pyjamas. The bees foraged the plantain obsessively, working the stalks round and round, their chaps bright with pollen. That was in May and at lunchtime today, early July, lesser knapweed was the total draw. Knapweed stands in big purple clumps, at eye height as I sit in the deckchair. Its flowers have a shape a bit like an approachable thistle. In this meadow I reckon there must be one bee for every three knapweed flower heads. It is a mass communal feast to which I've only brought a sandwich. As I see it, knapweed is nice, but this intoxicating? Really? My nose can detect no scent. Its flower heads are compact, perhaps this makes a firm base on which land, a stable platform? Its purple colour is a little short on blue tones to be a true purple, its centre leans towards pink. Is this the lure? Whatever it is I realise how scant my understanding is when it comes to the tastes of bees. It's almost like there's a rule of inverse proportionality at play. The less I notice a flower, the more the bee is smitten with it. This rings with counter-intuitiveness, of the need to not blindly trust my own tastes, but to follow the opposite feeling. It throws everything up in the air. But perhaps that is what is required. Who knows how things will land as we build a counter narrative to the grand narrative of our times; one based in a renewed connection between humans, places and the beings that dwell in these places.

I kept on with my lunch and watched a honey bee. It rifled through the stamens on a knapweed flower. And then a tiny distance above it, I saw a hoverfly. The hoverfly measured about half the bee's size and wore wasp hazard stripes. As the bee moved to a new flower, the hoverfly followed. There was a tiny lag, like a reluctant shadow and a momentary upwards bounce in the hoverfly's flight, before it resumed its steady holding a thumbnail's width above the bee. And this was how they carried on. Bee to flower. Hover to bee. I wondered what was going on. My first thought was that they were they friends. And then, was the hover a pet? Or maybe a parasol, a portable fan? Then I realised I might have this the upside down. Was the hoverfly in charge here, an overseer? And the bee its worker? The duo moved on to a new patch of knapweed. And then the two became four. Two more hoverflies joined the holding pattern, stacked vertically. One bee, three hovers. It looked like a diagram of the layers of middle management. In the time it took to eat a sandwich, again I realised how little I know. It is as Annie Dillard says, a thing such as this, 'will never make sense in our language but only in its own, and that we need to start all over again on a new continent, learning the strange syllables one by one' (1974: 108). I have to learn different sounds, fresh sights, a new lingua franca. Perhaps only then might I speak the language of nature's agency.

As I went back into the house I remembered a quote I once read, 'Nature is not only more complex than we think. It is more complex than we can think' (Egler in Barber, 2014: 88). Nature is beyond the comprehension of the thinking brain. But it is not beyond us. It is us, it is the wilderness parts of our imaginations, the untamed parts, the loose parts, the intuitive and sentient and inventive parts. It is all of the same parts where design thinking and practice have their roots. But to work from this untamed place within us takes practice, perhaps what Gary Snyder calls the 'practice of the wild': 'A deliberate and conscious effort to be more finely tuned to ourselves

and to the way the existing world is' (1990: viii). To notice, to revel in what we find and then to act. Only by bringing things into being with our hands, our tools, our voices and words, do we continually participate in the on-going renewal of life in the world. For me this act of participation feels like blending and combining; like the folding in of flour to creamed butter, sugar and eggs in the making of a cake. Folding in is how it feels to me.

On 24th April 2013 the Rana Plaza clothing factory in Bangladesh collapsed and more than 1000 garment workers lost their lives and 2500 were injured. I, like many others, felt cleaved apart by the tragedy and what the factory collapse said about the skewed priorities of the fashion system, about how in unplanned combination they have contributed to an unconscionable way of producing and consuming clothes. The system, the industry in which I work to design alternative systems and practices, has no care for those it is dependent on. I was both angry and ashamed.

On the first-year anniversary of the disaster I watched an interactive film about the tragedy and spent time on social media campaigning for change from a tiny cottage in which my family and I were then living. The cottage was part of a farm on a bluff at the edge of Macclesfield Forest in the north of England. Outside, pheasants barked, light gathered in pools, and the wide and deep landscape revealed it all: change and permanence, the objective reality of our planet.

The cottage was about a mile from the nearest road and the lane that linked us was steep and full of bends, like a fairground ride. At the lane's edge was coarse grass and broken drystone walls. Brown hares lived there. They ran along the lane. They legged it in the late afternoon, at dusk and at night in the tunnel of light thrown out by our car's main beam. Their movement was pleasure and ease, the hinging and folding of limbs, feet, independent ears swivelling, listening. One evening as I drove home, I watched one streak ahead of our car and then stop dead. She sniffed the air and turned. I can still see her now. We looked at each other, face to face, I did not blink. Slowly I eased the car past. I watched her in my rear view mirror turn back the way she had come. She lived as she should, as I should, true to her experience; choosing her route with a keen and fierce will.

After watching the documentary, my head still scattered by it all, and when my two sons were home from school, I went with them down to the tree-stump den that they had been building in the forest. We followed a path made by deer, through larch and sycamore. The den itself was a muddle of wind-blown sticks and we swarmed around it, building, messing about. We dragged branches, got our hair tangled in twigs, and passed time lifting things, shoving things, idly between the trees. In jackets globbed with pine resin, we added more branches. A flock of tiny birds moved in the tops of the trees. A bank of rain edged closer.

It is as Hasebe-Ludt et al say, 'The stories of our lives, if only our own stories, would not be worth telling. These stories become an ethos for our times, as they expose interdependence and interrelatedness with all beings' (2009: 129). Things exist only insofar as they can be related to other things: trees, the rain, a broken fashion

system; they intermingle human interests with all others'. The deadliest structural failure accident in human history is an issue that is not supply chain alone in its reach and shape. It is not just industrial, commercial. Nor are the questions at stake only those about factory workers. They have deeper roots that tangle with western culture's self-enclosed outlook; with its tendency to instrumentalise both ecosystems and workers as servants or resources, as a means to the fashion system's ends; and with the view that nature is the inessential, unconsidered background to technological society. Sixty years ago Aldo Leopold put it this way: 'We fancy that industry supports us, forgetting what supports industry.' (1959: 178). The human tragedy of Rana Plaza – perhaps all the more relatable because people are involved – is a reminder that, in order to protect workers and everyone else, we need to see the whole, to ecologise the fashion system. Our task becomes one of embedding our work in the systems it is dependent on, of growing our understanding of it as part of an interrelated earth so as to nurture an expanded community of relations on which all lives depend. I think this is what Val Plumwood meant when she suggested that while prudence — that is, taking care of ourselves — always demands a certain degree of human-centredness, it is possible to consider our own interests and the interests of others. Why then, should we have different standards for other-than-human cases? Instead she advocated for, 'a much larger, less humanized community, with an ethic of respect and attention needing no stopping point.' (2009: 443); a community where humans are not the focal point nor the limit of care, respect and attention. After all, as Plumwood states, 'human-centredness is not in the interests of either humans or non-humans' (ibid: 443). We are all in this together.

The den, the hare, the flowers, the bees, are snickets into a world that exceeds us, that is greater than our potential and our knowledge. This world, our world, draws us outwards and onwards. Here the currency of choice is the capacity to care, to give attention, to feel the attention returned. Perhaps then things like the siren song of self-interest, the part of fashion that gets all the play and all the headlines and is marketable and profitable, gets reframed in our minds in the process. Fashion is not just an expression of human-centred individualism. It is also about solidarity with all our ecological relations. Most fashion experiences neglect getting support from others. But in folding in the agency and independent value of our relations, fashion experiences become as much about reciprocity as self-interest. This is the long view; it can open up a wild, untrammelled mutualistic practice of design, a counter narrative of connection and care, where fashion takes us towards the earth.

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