

LUCY NEAL

Playing for Time

making art as if the world mattered



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Introduction

For years, I loved to *correr con el foc* as the Spanish say, to run with fire: at street festivals on the feasts of San José in Valencia and San Juan in Barcelona and at home in the UK, on bonfire night.

I carried the fascination into my professional life, with fiery spectacles as part of the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT) which I co-directed: Catalonian Devils making mayhem in Battersea Park and Groupe F's flaming *Birds of Fire* floating down the River Thames.

Then one day, I was brought up short by an older fire, from longer ago, buried so deep in my memory, I'd forgotten it was there.

I'd taken Kaurna fire-makers and keepers from Australia, Karl and Waiata Telfer to meet Groupe F's Christophe Berthonneau, a world-renowned fire artist and pyrotechnician based in the Camargue. At Christophe's request Karl lit a fire on the floor of the digitally wired-up world of the Groupe F office. Rubbing fire-sticks together, a spark seemed to roll from nowhere, which Karl wrapped in kindling like a baby, until the smouldering smoke burst into flame. It was a thrilling act of appearance: not there, then, suddenly, there. An originary moment of creation both old and new, like watching time peel back thousands of years, to the beginning of the story of humans on Earth – yet also rich in possibilities, like a moment to begin again from.

Playing for Time is the story of rich possibilities and moments to begin again from: a story of connecting to new ways of being human on Earth. The current story is tired and spent; a catastrophe for sustained life on the planet. It's a book about artists and communities bringing stories to light about living creatively within the limits of a finite planet.

WHY THE BOOK WAS WRITTEN

A few years ago, I found myself, archetypally, in contrast to *correr con el foc*, in a dark wood having lost my way. In the dark at night I was assailed by nightmares about what was happening to the biosphere, and by day I fretted I was making things worse, not better, just by getting up and being human.

In the dramaturgy of life, I needed to know how to act. I wanted a coherent narrative that faced the global challenges I was waking up to, whilst inspiring me to live as creatively as I could. I wanted, as playwright turned politician Václav Havel once said to 'live in truth', acting as if a more positive future were viable,

whilst navigating my way through an unsustainable present. I needed a new story to live by.

I decided to stand by the story of art – the enchanter of life and alchemist of change. Not an art I was a spectator at or consumed, but an art in which I was a participating collaborator, a storyteller and celebrant. An art that inspired the reinvention and reimagining of our world at a time of great uncertainty; an art that could be practised by everyone, inseparable from daily life. An art that had a pivotal role in remodelling society, reinventing its values in a transition to an ecological and less anthropocentric age.

This book sprang from a desire to understand the role our imaginations and creative skills play in reimagining a world in which life on Earth is cherished and sustained. *Playing for Time* gives voice to this new narrative and the artists shifting society's focus from commodity and consumerism towards community and collaboration: stories, as Ben Okri says that 'can turn an age around'.¹

STEALING FIRE FROM THE GODS: THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE

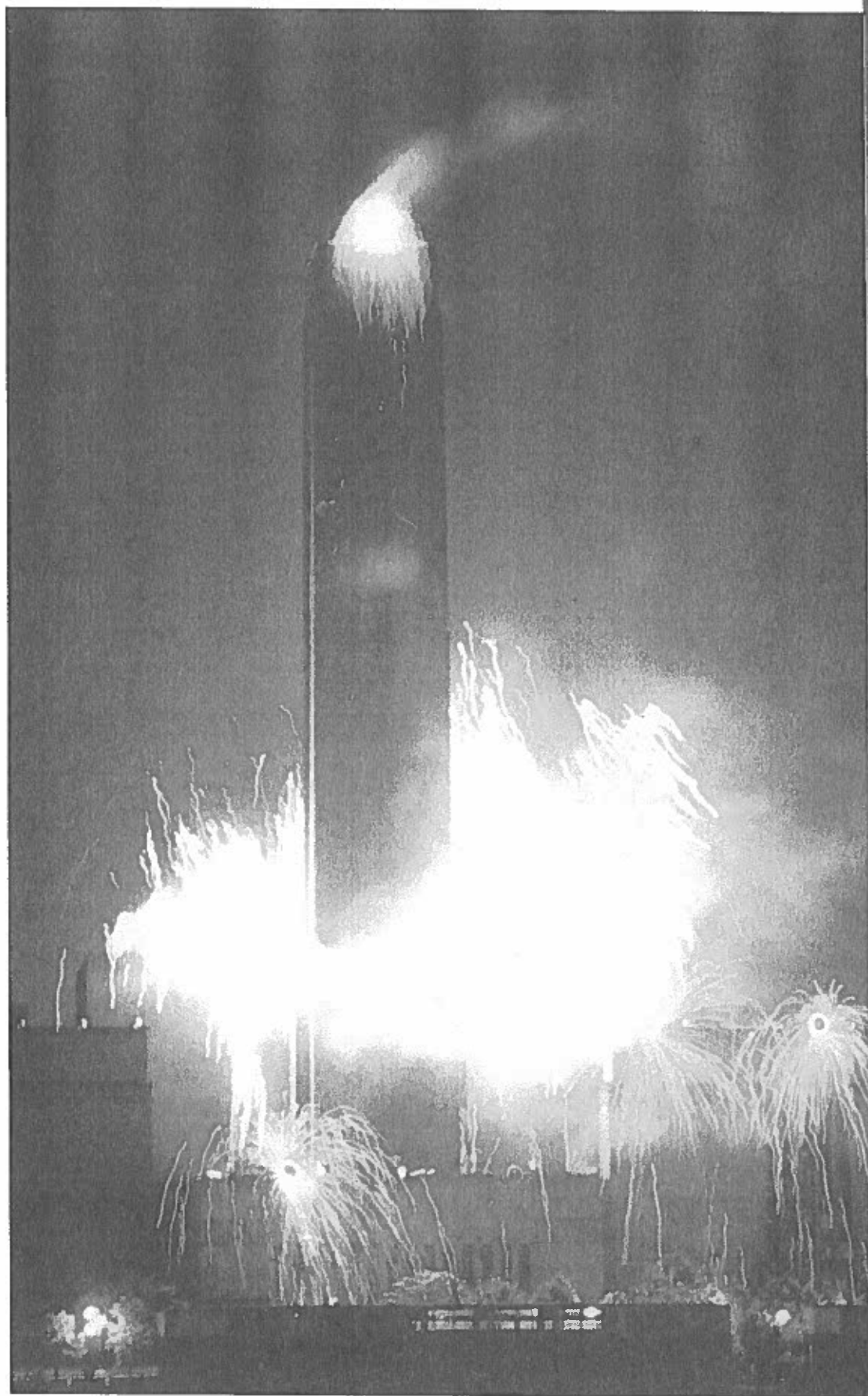
I've always seen participatory and celebratory events as catalysts for change: occasions that take us out of our ordinary lives to glimpse other ways of seeing and being. We cross into liminal space, where nothing's fixed and anything becomes possible. We return from this parallel imaginary universe, subtly altered, sometimes for ever. (In quantum physics, this is the multi-verse, reached mathematically only with imaginary numbers at right angles to the real world.²)

I learnt about liminal space at LIFT. We made theatre in unusual places all over the city for 25 years, pushing at the edge of what was possible; closing roads, opening derelict bus stations; building a seating structure in the River Thames and lighting a giant flame from Bankside Power Station.

It was tricksterish and, like Raven stealing fire from the gods, I learnt one of the secrets of the universe: up close, the laws of possibility are not fixed. They can be risked, experimented with and gambled on. Between the boundary of what is possible and what is not there is a field: a space of transformation the universe only releases in the dusty arena of action, trying, failing and trying again. The threshold between what is and what could be is rich in potential for change.

Playing for Time joins the dots between the 64 artists and activists who have crossed the threshold of action to reimagine what's possible for themselves and their communities and the world. It shows that all we need is here. Possibilities for the future are, as Paul Allen from the Centre for Alternative Technology says, 'already dupped in the present'.

11/1993 Launch at
Bankside Power
Station, designed
and produced by
Anne Bean and Paul
Burwell
Photo by
Patricia Crummay



ALL KINDS OF TIME

Building alternatives is always an act of hope – the embodied refusal of the present³

As we step into a new geological age of a four billion year process on Earth, called the ‘anthropocene’, it is hard to imagine as humans we are accountable for reimagining our world on behalf of ourselves, subsequent generations and all species. We need celebratory social spaces to look backwards and forwards in time, where our collective knowledge, intuition and a sense of wonder at what is possible can come together.

The book explores how artists re-engineer time to allow our imaginations to flourish: the time for sound to travel; to connect to ancestors; for coral to spawn; a badger to decompose; grow a garden; build trust with children in an acute hospital ward; a bee to collect pollen and for a community to bury a friend. Art can create what Amy Sharrocks calls ‘the architecture of a moment’ made between people.

The arts are a way, adds sound artist Ansuman Biswas, ‘of embodying an attitude towards the future’. To speed up change, we need paradoxically, to slow down, to play for time: exploring dimensions of time that tap our creativity and the fullness of the present in which transformations can occur and from which the future can emerge.

Yet, we’re on a finite trajectory in terms of time. In 2013 the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) was ‘unequivocal’ about global warming being the result of human actions; 400 parts per million of carbon were registered in the atmosphere for the first time in human history; Australia added a colour to its heat map and super typhoon Haiyan killed 5,000 in the Philippines. ‘The heat is on,’ said UN’s Ban Ki-Moon; ‘Now we must act’. ‘We can stop this madness,’ cried Filipino Yeb Sano at the November 2013 UN Climate talks yet politicians, like UK’s Prime Minister David Cameron seem set on increasing climate disruption, going ‘all out for fracking’. Despite England having the worst floods for 250 years, our dominant culture is one of wilful denial of climate change.

‘PLAY IS THE EXULTATION OF THE POSSIBLE’ – MARTIN BUBER

This book also makes a case for play – inscribed in us (and other mammals) as a means of exploring the world, learning what we need to know to survive and the ground of art’s being. In life, we rehearse a range of possible futures and hold different realities in our imaginations at once. We make time paths for these possible futures, saying ‘if that happens, then I will do that’. We draw on these ‘memories’ of the future when we make decisions about how to act ‘in the real world’.⁴ Play extends the range of possibilities we can draw on.

Empathy and cooperation are key to play. *Doing unto others what you would have them do unto you* shapes our understanding of our difference from others and the shared part we play in a just social narrative.

Play is serious. It opens us to creativity and change, but can be disrupted by fear, which our current planetary emergency can elicit. Fear narrows our cognitive faculties so that we then cease to be curious or able to learn. Neuroscience shows how collaboration in the arts negates the cortisol-inducing effects of fear by making encounters with the unexpected, surprising and fun. As actor Roy Faudree says 'Fun is a very silly word, but a highly productive state'.

Play is also the basis of theatre. 2000 years ago, it was 'place for seeing' for citizens in Greece. A critical moment in the 'seeing' in both tragedies and comedies was known as *anagnorisis* when a central truth was revealed, whatever denials and dramas of obfuscations had gone before. The difference between comedy and tragedy was one of time: in a tragedy the moment of recognition or 'seeing' comes too late – the hero, unable to recognise the truth, has killed his father, slept with his mother. Ameliorative action is impossible.

In comedy, time exists for learning and hope: a community can be reconstituted and renewed. Disaster is averted, as a case of ignorance or mistaken identity. Circles of life reconnect in a communal celebration, a marriage or union. Obfuscators of the truth – those in power are shamed and run to catch up with the party.⁵

In this analogy of play in a contemporary world, it's possible artists can be circuit breakers of tragedy, surprising people with alternative ways of seeing, jolting them awake from denial and speeding up a public process of seeing and feeling the 'truth' of climate change. They can make the moment of recognition less painful by opening possibilities for change and renewal. Comedy in this sense involves a renewal of life and community.

TRANSITION: A PLACE OF PLAY

Transition...creates a groundswell for change; a catalyst for communities across the world to see an energy-constrained future as the motivator for creative change, rather than disaster.⁶

The Transition movement accelerated my comedic appreciation of how communities are reconstituted as places of learning and reinvention. It took me a while to recognise the place to play was where I was standing in Tooting, south west London, where I'd lived for more than 20 years.

When I came across Transition at a talk in a Totnes church hall in November 2007, I heard a language of 'engaged optimism' I'd not heard before. Making change in how you live where you live made a coherent link between the challenges of climate change and peak oil and their solutions: creativity, relocalisation and community resilience were key.

Understanding the holistic nature of the challenges being faced and the potential solutions made it all more manageable. As my Transition Town Tooting colleague Hilary Jennings said: 'Rather than a strange scientific issue around carbon dioxide which I didn't really understand it becomes a clearer issue of exponential growth meeting finite resources.'

A different future was possible, but it had to be first imagined as a conscious collective public act. This was the art of the possible to me, the work of the imagination and what the artist Joseph Beuys called 'social sculpture': an expanded concept of art in which 'every person is an artist'. Transformation of society as a whole could be regarded as one great work of art to which each person contributes creatively.

After setting up Transition Town Tooting in early 2008 I sensed my physiology expand to absorb a dizzying opening up of possibilities: initiatives acted on in the here and now. The future of the arts lay in relocalisation as an inevitable consequence of peak oil, economic contraction and climate change. I'd discovered what communications designer, Chris Thornton, calls a space 'for people to reconfigure their sense of self...to reclaim the potential of being as act.'

From a dominant culture of identity as consumer, Transition fosters 'intrinsic' cultural values that transcend self-interest.

Action reminds us of our innate potential for choice and making real the things we value...where action is socialised or collaborative, the sense of connection and responsibility to others encourages it to continue.⁷

Two early experiences of celebratory public events revealed to me how art-making and community-making in, what I've chosen to call, 'transitional arts practice' went hand in hand. Celebration, potentially counter-intuitive as realities of climate and economy bite, made 'real the things we value' subverting a narrative of commodity and greed, with its inexorable logic of individualism and inequality.

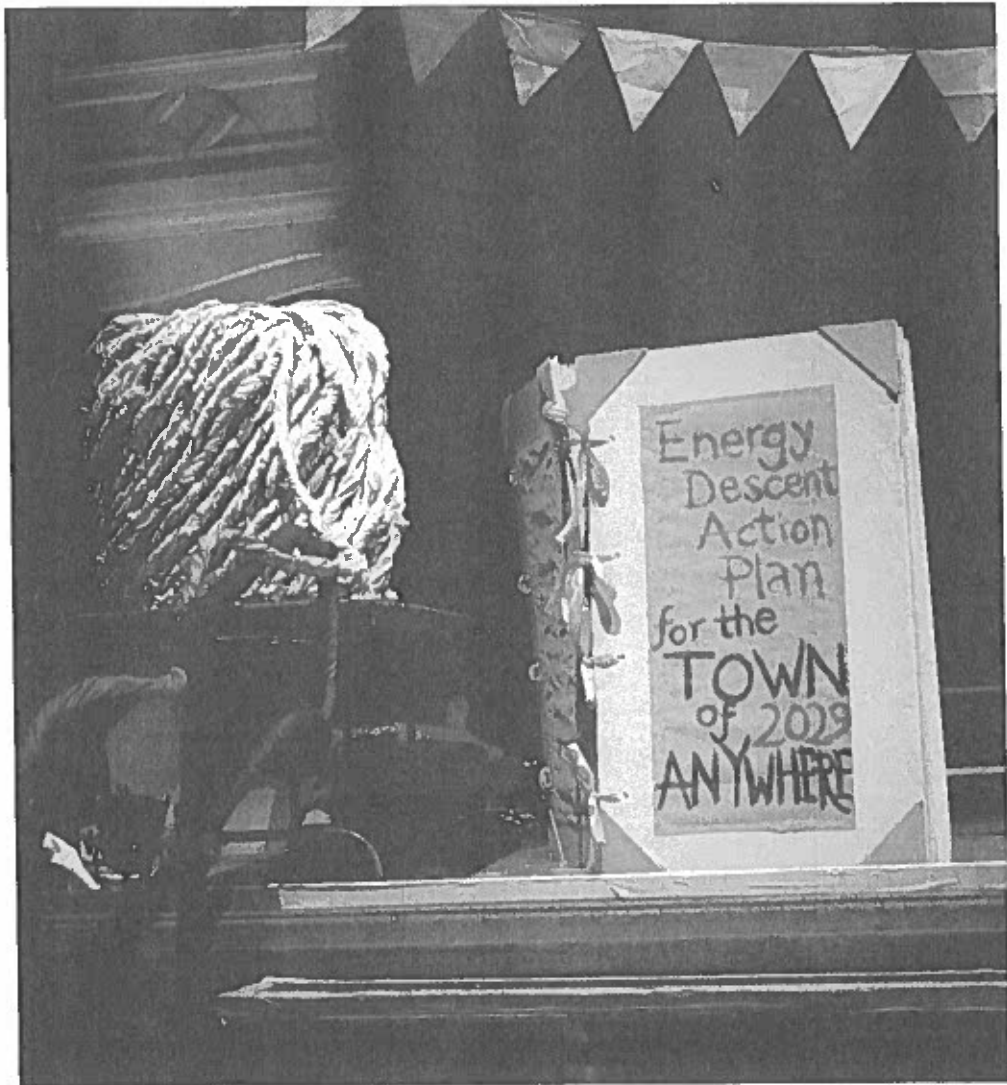
The first event, the Tooting Trashcatchers' Carnival in 2010 ran peak oil and climate change workshops over a year in parallel with carnival making days and culminated in an event one of the 800 *carnivalistas* called 'whole joy'. The second, two years later, on a smaller and more intimate scale, the Encounters' Tooting Transition Shop opened a shop on the High Street where 'nothing was for sale', but lots was 'on offer'.

In both I witnessed capacities of the human heart to engage at a deep level with knowledge of global challenges with a yearning for a narrative of change that valued things that mattered most – family, friends, love, justice, connection. The emergent qualities of inclusiveness, creativity and community at both events, brought deep satisfaction and meaningful identity to people's lives. Both events taught us to be bold in making emotional public space for shared responses of

the heart; kind and empathetic exchanges between people, whilst holding the public's gaze on the challenges we face.

Transition Network
Conference 2009,
Battersea Arts
Centre: *Energy
Descent Workshop
in Two Hours for
Transition Town
Anywhere* by Lucy
Neal

Photo by
Alice Maggs



THE REENCHANTING OF OUR CULTURE

This is what art critic Suzi Gablik has called the 'reenchanting of our culture': personal and collective creativity connecting to social, moral and ecological responsibilities. Across generations and cultures people were glad to be accountable and able to respond.

Peaceful, pleasurable, communal life became a radical goal; joy a radical force. Evidence as Douglas Harding, English mystic, once said that 'humans are built open'.⁸

Both events cultivated what Tom Crompton from Common Cause⁹ identifies as intrinsic rather than extrinsic values: the 'deeper frames' of values which reaffirm and motivate us such as a sense of community, connection to friends, family and the natural world and that transcend self-interest.

Extrinsic values in contrast 'are contingent on perception of others', and relate to 'envy of higher status social strata, admiration of material wealth and power'. The significance of making the distinction between the two is that whilst extrinsic values perpetuate an acquisitive and consumerist worldview, intrinsic values tend towards lower carbon consumption; a stewardship of the commons and resources fairly shared. Both Transition and the arts elicit intrinsic values of connection and cooperation.

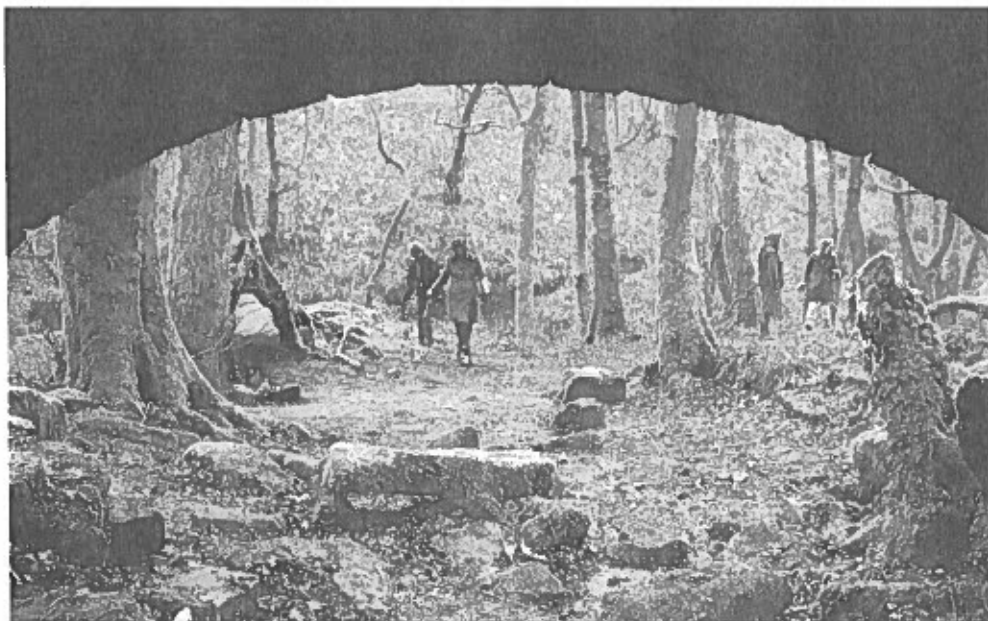
'We are not yet community creatures,' says Scott Peck in *The Different Drum*:

We are impelled to relate with each other for our survival. But we do not yet relate with the inclusivity, realism, self-awareness, vulnerability, commitment, openness, freedom, equality, and love of genuine community... It is our task – our essential, central, crucial task – to transform ourselves from mere social creatures into community creatures. It is the only way that human evolution will be able to proceed.¹⁰

The practice of community and living within limits is central to this book. In studies of interconnectedness, the energy and resilience of a system are where connections and links are the strongest; participation, diversity, plurality and variability the greatest. In focusing on our creativity, imagination and intuition as community creatures, transitional arts practice simply manifests and gives expression to the participatory universe of which we're a part.

HOW THE BOOK WAS WRITTEN

In keeping with the collaborative principles of transitional arts practice, this book has been co-authored by 64 artists, creators and agents of change. A core group of artists built the core of the book's stories and practices with myself as main author and from this core, the rest grew.



Playing for Time
core contributors
in the grounds of
Lumb Bank Arvon
Centre, South
Yorkshire, 2013
Photo by
Ellie Harrison

In March 2013, 15 of us travelled to Lumb Bank, near Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire to lay the first tracks of the book. We spent a week in a cotton mill owner's house, on the wooded slopes of the Calder Valley. Once belonging to Ted Hughes, Lumb Bank is now an Arvon Centre and provided us with time and space to write. We uncovered the patterns of transitional arts practice which are articulated in *Playing for Time* into something we trust others can recognise and be inspired to take up.

FOUR LAYERS OF NARRATIVE

Another collaborative moment in the making of the book, came when I was writer-in-residence at Battersea Arts Centre (BAC) the year before, inviting playwright and activist Sarah Woods to explore ideas about devising and holding space in which things happen.

We exchanged what we knew about space made for events, plays, performance, rites of passage and ceremony: the process of hosting and gathering people to create a temporary community from strangers. What were the critical incidents we'd observed that afforded people shifts in perspective and a sense that change felt possible?

We observed how people 'travelled' through such events especially those that intentionally drew in the big narratives of climate change such as Transition and community events looking at energy scarcity, peak oil and fracking. We recognised the newness and improvised energy unlocked in people at such events: what Sarah called 'live story-making' and, like a spark falling from sticks being rubbed together, four narratives fell out.

At a public 'fireside chat' at BAC later that day, we summarised the day's exploration, framed by Sarah's recent thinking around narrative:

Super Narrative

The Super narrative is a Gaian narrative of creation and of planetary and natural systems that support an abundance of life, including us.

As a narrative of home this big narrative of Earth's story is unstable and shifting. This makes it frightening to face and is often missing in the public sphere. This can be the 'elephant in the room', like any difficult situation people do not want to talk about.

Grand Narrative

This is a 'doing' narrative about intervention and dramatic change. Undertaken with others, it galvanises and lifts us up and creates a quantum shift in our actions and campaigns to sustain life on Earth. It can however also daunt and overwhelm us.

Communal Narrative

This is a shared narrative of collaboration and co-creation. It has a dynamic creativity that can transform all the other three narratives and can be intentionally built with care: the creation of community becomes a collaborative performance space in which the telling of the Super narrative becomes possible.

It galvanises us to be part of the Grand and is the narrative of people-led social change movements, Transition, the arts and culture at their best – building bridges, empathy and understanding.

Personal Narrative

Personal narratives are central to who we are and how we act; how we experience our lives as human beings, balancing an inner life of spirit and emotion with outward actions. These rich biographical narratives can also be vulnerable, guarded and alone.

At a deep level our biographical stories (Personal) intuit and imagine a connection to the planetary (Super). There is a longing to belong to the collective (Communal) and some instinct, if not always the courage, for a narrative of action (Grand).

The levels of narrative are a compass for balancing our actions or choices we make and are dynamic in their interaction. If a collective narrative (Communal) fails to refer to the planetary crisis (Super), an urgency for change, on the surface at least, recedes from view. The Super though can still be sensed as ‘an elephant in the room’ draining energy away and with it the potential for harnessing change (Grand).

Should our biographical story (Personal), pay constant attention to the crisis (Super) but with little community engagement (Communal) and a driving sense of urgency for change (Grand), this can be emotionally overwhelming and unsustainable over time.¹¹

A sense that we are a part of the Earth’s natural systems, not apart from them, is the key to all these narratives which are open-ended: *Playing for Time* invites participation in their unfolding to help shape what their outcome will be.

Their identification has created the narrative edges in *Playing for Time* and the book contains stories that reflect all four. Sarah takes these a step further in Section Three, as a foundation for transitional arts practice. They are most efficacious as change narratives when they combine in dynamic balance.

As reader, you bring stories to the narrative of change of your own which help it flourish.

Transition Town
Tooting poster of
growing participants
for Foodival 2014
by David Thorne

Are you growing for the Foodival?



Tooting Foodival
13th & 14th Sept 2014



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THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The First section sets out the 'macro' drivers of change and key systems that challenge our present times. They cover energy, finance, food, community resilience, activism, climate change, kindness and wildness. Together they establish a realistic basis for collective action on which to build the possibility of a more sustainable future.

Transitional arts practice proposes how these 'macro' challenges are transformed creatively by a daily 'micro' personal practice.

The Second section gathers an abundance of stories together of transitional arts practice: artists and creators whose sense of agency sets a new era for the arts.

Few of these projects fall into conventional categories of 'dance' or 'music' or 'visual arts'. Just as there is now 'post-normal science' (where there's less available information than desired) we're moving towards post-normal art. Not an art of Mona Lisas and Damien Hirst diamond-encrusted skulls, but an art that moves on from representation to transformation. An art heralded by William Morris, Joseph Beuys and Suzi Gablik, happy to answer to our ethical, ecological and moral responsibilities and where the personal has become emphatically planetary.

Few take place in the conventional places for art such as galleries and theatres but on bridges and bandstands, in apiaries, on hospital wards and hillsides. They emerge from the inbetweens of people, place, land, community, bright hope and deep fear to create an art of living. They cross boundaries between walking, gathering stories, playing games, drifting, planting trees, making theatre, growing food, digging clay, rites of passage, building cairns and lighting fires: qualities for building community and living within limits.

They plant themselves at the thresholds of new possibilities and open space to play with and for time. Titled Land, Home, Rites of Passage, Food Growing, Activism, Water, Hand, Body, Word and Street each proposes an essential element to start from, return to and combine in new ways.

The Third section gives Recipes for Action and Tools which offer triggers and starting points to inspire you to create positive change as individuals and in your community.

ART IN SERVICE TO LIFE

'In our culture,' says Suzi Gablik in conversation with James Hillman,¹² 'the notion of art being in service to anything is an anathema. Service has been totally deleted from our viewpoint.'

Playing for Time pioneers an era of the arts in service to life, accountable to the time in which we live and, as Gablik says, of 'making art as if the world mattered.'

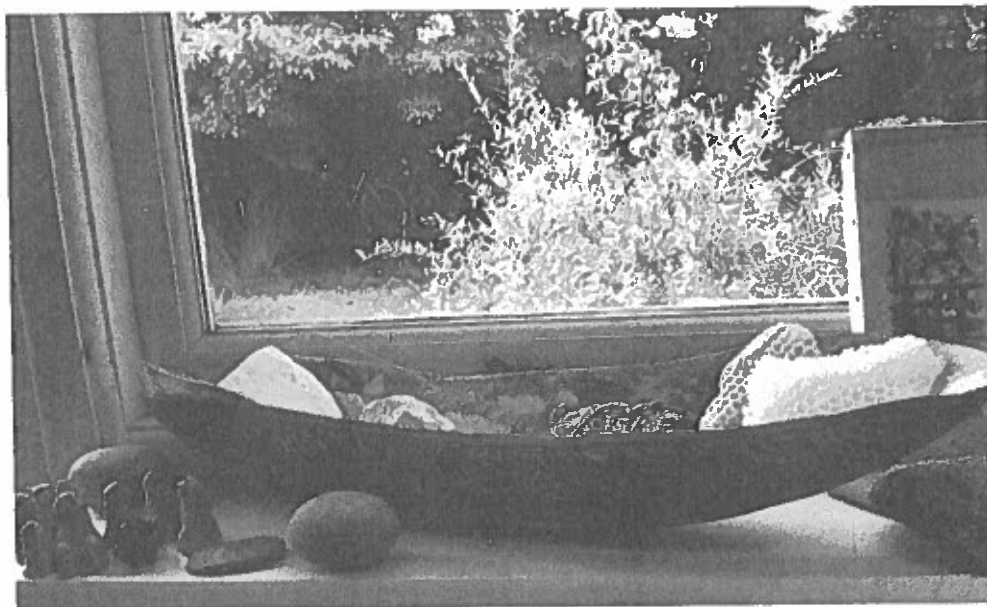
Holding one's gaze on the challenge of re-imagining the future, without being paralysed by a fear of it, requires courage and tricksterishness. The stories in this

book are part of the revolution happening as people wake up to what's required of us. A humble revolution asking for open-heartedness, creativity and compassion but handing back much more.

There have been times writing this book that have broken my heart – recognising the need for it and the challenges we and other species face over the next 5, 15, 50, 500 years. In the next beat though I've glimpsed the energy and life contained here: the humour, beauty, ingenuity, resistance, inventiveness, mischievousness and joy.

Gambiarra is a Brazilian word for an improvised, playful kind of fixing in which objects are 'conjoined to make something new'. Choreographer and theatremaker Fabio Santos, whose first theatre company was called Gambiarra, told me it also describes the coloured lights hung in the streets in Brazil to create an instant sense of party. This book as a whole is a playful fixing of stories about creativity and community to be amplified and celebrated by everyone, everyday, including you the book's reader: a narrative of the future co-created by as many people as possible.

Wooden coolamun given to author by Waiata and Karl Telfer with clay figures from *Playing for Time* workshop at Lumb Bank, led by Julia Rowntree
Photo by Lucy Neal



EARTH, WATER, WIND AND FIRE

The wooden coolamun on my desk is made from eucalyptus – the fire tree. Witchetty grubs are carved into its sides. Waiata and her brother Karl gave it to me, during their visit to Europe, after they'd organised the Kaurna Palti Meyanna Opening Ceremony of the Adelaide Festival in 2002. The ceremony summoned Kaurna ancestors to create a welcome to the city for 50,000 residents and visitors to walk a new peaceful journey together. In aboriginal tradition, the coolamun is made to carry fire and water and this one carried the ceremony's spirit fire breathing new life into the dreaming of Tjilbruke, a creation ancestor and keeper of fire and peace. Today it contains chunks of chalk from the Chilterns, empty honeycomb and a stone from the River Thames.

Waiata performed at the Bargehouse in London as part of the *LIFT Enquiry'04*, with artist Lynette Wallworth, connecting their stories of truth and reconciliation to stories of British and Australian history.

She and her brother gave away the coolamun in recognition of the connections made between our respective lives and lands. Carrying the white ochre earth of her mother's land, it has bound the River Thames, my land and ancestors and hers in ceremony; histories and dreamings of thousands and thousands of years. Many artists' stories follow in the next section, including Waiata's.

The coolamun is a metaphor for connection and, like a seed, it is filled with a promise and potential for life. It has focused my attention in the writing of this book about 'making art as if the world mattered', holding a thread between the furthest points in time and place for creating a journey, a new dreaming. A future ceremony may open up the stories the coolamun holds in its silence one day. For now, it links the Thames to the North Sea across the oceans to Kurna country in South Australia to Brisbane and beyond.

I write this at midwinter, as a new solar year begins; a time of turning the wheel and leaps of light. In the eight minutes since you turned the pages, rays of light have travelled from the sun to Earth.

This story is open-ended and unfinished. It needs you to take it up.