

**RECLAIMING THE BODY AS HOME:**  
**THE BODYBASED ARTS AS CENTER OF THE ‘NEW VILLAGE’**

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**INTRODUCTION**

These writings discuss the reasons why the arts—particularly the live, participatory, bodybased arts—must be restored to their central role in community life if we are to achieve the goal of sustainable living. I am addressing the many people all over the globe who are working so hard to design and implement ecovillages, cohousing communities, permaculture homesteads and sustainable living projects with the hope of opening a much-needed dialogue about what role the arts must play in these communities and why. I am also addressing the many artists out there who seek to direct their art towards social and ecological health.

Here I can only begin to touch upon a subject which is largely absent in literature on sustainability and permaculture. For example, Bill Mollison’s now classic text, *Permaculture: A Designer’s Manual*, whom many (myself included) consider to be a permaculture “bible” of sorts, hardly even mentions the word “art.” This nearly six-hundred page text is devoted to the laws and principles of good, sustainable design, including pattern understanding, settlement design—even diversity, alternative economic models, and right livelihood, but includes nothing on how we must design to reincorporate the arts into these settlements. I do not intend this statement as a criticism of Mollison, whose contribution to the cause of sustainability (which is in itself an art form) cannot be overestimated. Rather, I mean to draw some attention to what may be a “blind spot” in the permaculture and environmental movements in general.

I strongly believe that any attempts to build a new paradigm for sustainable human communities will be unsuccessful unless the arts are restored to a central role in that paradigm. We may have remarkable technical prowess in eco-building design, beneficial plant guilds, and alternative energy systems, but if we do not consistently utilize the arts to heal our decimated social infrastructure and to engage our whole selves, this prowess will be insufficient. This is not to say that technical or scientific knowledge is unimportant. Rather, the time has come to recognize that the knowledge gained in practicing more intuitive arts is just as essential as rational scientific knowledge. Indeed, scientific knowledge cannot be whole unless it is balanced by the arts.

## **ART IS NOT A LUXURY**

From the communes of the sixties to the experimental communities of today, many skilled and talented people have been involved: builders, bodyworkers, system-designers, gardeners, healers, organizers, grafters, musicians, midwives, bakers, herbalists, shoemakers, mothers, weavers and so on. The high rate of failure in these communities, of burnout and re-assimilation into the mainstream, is not caused by lack of skill or capability. Simply put, these communities fail over and over again because people cannot get along. It is the lack of healthy social infrastructure which has caused and continues to cause most of the difficulty. And it is precisely within this arena of social health that the arts most benefit a community, and the individuals that comprise that community. Community arts practices are quite indispensable if we want to fulfill the main permaculture tenet “CARE FOR PEOPLE.”

In tribal societies all over the globe, what we might refer to as the “participatory arts” serve the function of keeping the social wheels greased. These societies use dance, song, music, and theater to bond the group together, to resolve conflicts, to dissipate tensions and blockages both *within* the body and *between* people. The participatory arts accomplish this social function quite efficiently. Improvising with sound and movement serves as a method for people to explore a sense of union with larger cycles and patterns that are simply too vast to understand rationally. This valuable type of experience, where we physically harmonize with natural law, cannot be achieved through science or technique alone.

If we observe indigenous tribes—both human and non-human—we notice that people come together regularly and cyclically. Perhaps they gather around the campfire each evening, singing songs at sunrise or the full moon, celebrating, perhaps, the first day of the summer. We also notice that everybody in the tribe participates. There are no rows of chairs where people sit down, watch, applaud the “performers” and then leave.

Today, mainstream art may qualify as entertainment, and perhaps voyeurism, but it certainly does not constitute *participatory* art, and thus the essential benefits of this type of art are not accrued to the community. The lack of modern participatory art gatherings is noticeable, and this lack is closely related to the sense of alienation, of separation from nature and from each other that plagues modern people, and our attempts at creating New Communities.

## **CULTURAL CLEARCUTTING**

Our interpersonal skills—skills critical to the survival of any social species—have been atrophying from lack of use as the modern person moves from our own house or apartment, to our car, complete with our own personal entertainment center, to our own personal desk with our own personal computer, then back in the car again, returning home to spend hours in front of our the television screen. We eat dinner in facing the TV instead of each other. On the bus, we don headphones or bury our faces in the newspaper instead of chatting with our neighbor. At the café, which has long been a center for

cultural exchange and intellectual debate, our email accounts beckon us to sit staring into the televisual nexus. Will we begin to see “laptopfree zones” in order to fend off the rapidly encroaching “café silencio” syndrome?” Has it become a political act to simply say ‘good morning’ to someone when you pass them on the street?

Human cultural and social structures, which evolved over millions of years, have been clearcut in much the same way as our forests have been. A healthy, mature forest contains a network of countless overlapping and interwoven connections: between leaves and air, roots and fungus, birds and bark, worms and soil, and on and on. When this forest is clearcut, the intricately woven fabric is left in tatters, and it takes time and attention to reweave it.

In the same way that we must replant our landscapes, we recognize that we must pay very close attention at this time to reweaving our unraveled and torn social fabric. As we design and begin life in our New Villages, we can utilize the participatory arts to help achieve this reweaving. When we gather together to dance, sing, play music and tell stories, we empower ourselves to reclaim control over our social health.

Without live-art gatherings in which every person participates, I believe societies suffer at best from meaninglessness and at worst from self-destruction. The low-priority placed on gatherings of this kind and upon art in general (i.e. “i’m just too busy”) is an indication of a society with a declining quality of life. Please note that this desperate mode of existence is just the opposite of that grand promise of modern, industrial society to provide abundance and leisure for all through technology. If we truly seek to form an abundant and thriving New Society, we must recognize that the practice of art is by no means optional. Now, more than ever, we need arts practice to help us relearn the social skills necessary for our survival.

### **DANCE AS IF YOUR LIFE DEPENDS ON IT**

There are numerous examples of aboriginal peoples who recognize the dancers and actors of their tribes to be so essential to the life of the tribe that they are excused from the day to day labors of working for food and shelter so their full attention can be focused on these sacred tasks. In indigenous Hawaiian culture, for example, it is believed that dancers practicing Hula influence wind, wave, weather and many other larger patterns, creating safe passage for boats and travelers. Without these arts practitioners to create sheltered harbor amidst the swift currents of an everchanging earth, they believe their culture will cease to function. For these reasons, dancers were once chosen at birth, their entire lives dedicated to the Hula Goddess Laka.

The temple dancers of India were once likewise chosen at birth or a very young age and spent their lives on temple grounds built distinctly for this purpose by the efforts of the rest of the tribe. Many Indigenous American tribes also believe that their dance and song influences the weather and relates them to the places where they live, gather and hunt. Aboriginal Australians use song and movement to map the terrains they travel. Without

these “songlines” to guide them, they believe they will become lost, putting their survival in jeopardy.

When we recognize the distinct lack of these ancient arts, we can now see that modern society is indeed quite lost, and our own survival *is* in jeopardy. All who are interested in forming a healthy, sustainable new society would be well-advised to invest in a resurgence of these arts. Dance as if your life depends on it (it does).

## **BODY IS EARTH**

Carbon, water, nitrogen, oxygen—the same materials that comprise the Earth, also make up our own blood and bones, our breath and our brain. Our shedding hair, skin, tears, and eventually our entire bodies are all returned to the Earth where they break down again into these same materials.

Interestingly, we can see this basic knowledge reiterated through an etymological inquiry. The modern English word *Earth* shares its root sound *-er* with other words in our Indoeuropean language family that mean “to exist” and “to be.” We may recognize this sound in the Old English word *earth* or *art*, as in “thou art,” or the Spanish word *ser* which means “to be.” Over time, the extended roots *-ergh* and *-orgh* evolved into the Greek word for *orkheisthai*—“to dance”—and the word *orchestra* in English. (Chambers Dictionary of Etymology, 1998, American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 1969.)

Thus, when we utter the word for the planet upon which we make our home, we are speaking aloud all that linguistic history, affirming the knowledge that our very existence is intimately related to Earth. When we dance and make music, we are actually describing, reflecting, and participating in the processes of Earth.

It becomes more and more apparent each day that human beings will be required to deepen our understanding of Earth’s processes, and harmonize with these processes if we are to thrive on a long-term basis. We can do this simply by consulting our own bodies.

Since our bodies are quite literally made from Earth, we can use them directly to gain an understanding of the way Earth works. And this type of understanding is not reserved for just a select few “experts.” Just as each and every one of us has a body, each and every one of us has the opportunity (and responsibility) to access this deep knowledge through the practice of bodybased arts.

We must now summon our body wisdom to balance out the inefficiencies and myopia that has accompanied thousands of years of exclusionary use of technical and rational thought. Only when we have absorbed wholistic, natural “law,” and ecological principles thoroughly into the entire bodymind system—not just the frontal lobe of the brain—will we truly begin to innovate solutions to mounting ecological and societal problems.

## CREATIVITY: FUNDAMENTAL MECHANISM OF EVOLUTION

When tribal societies gather to create art together, they honor patterns fundamental to human health and experience. Recent developments in physics and wholistic sciences are teaching us that these patterns are not only important to human beings, but are in fact fundamental to the nature of Life itself.

Physicist and whole-systems theorist Fritjof Capra, examines the relationship between science and our social systems in his book *The Hidden Connections: Integrating The Biological, Cognitive and Social Dimensions of Life Into a Science of Sustainability* (Doubleday Press, 2002).

In Chapter 1, *The Nature of Life*, Capra explores the defining characteristics of life itself. He explains that “all cellular structures need to feed on continual flows of matter and energy from their environment to stay alive” (Capra, p. 13). Miraculously, Despite this unceasing whirlwind of change in which structures are restored as fast as they are decaying, the form of a cell or organism miraculously remains constant.

It is through a constant feedback and adaptation process that an organism is able to achieve this stability within a constantly changing environment. Capra’s findings demonstrate that even physics has now recognized the inextricable intertwining of creativity and evolution:

...When the flow of energy increases, the system may encounter a point of instability, known as a “bifurcation point,” at which it can branch off into an entirely new state where new structures and new forms of order may emerge...This spontaneous emergence of order at critical points of instability is one of the most important concepts of the new understanding of life. It is...often referred to simply as “emergence.” It has been recognized as the dynamic origin of development, learning and evolution. *In other words, creativity---the generation of new forms---is a key property of all living systems.* And since emergence is an integral part of the dynamics of open systems, we reach the important conclusion that open systems develop and evolve. Life constantly reaches out into novelty (Capra, p. 13-14).

If creativity is one of the essential characteristics of life, and modern, techno-industrial society consistently relegates creative arts—the bodybased arts in particular—to the very bottom of the priority list, it is any wonder this society consistently engages in destructive behavior? When we contemplate the findings of modern physicists such as Capra, we can see that a deprioritization of the arts is a deprioritization of life. In denying the essential importance of the arts, we deny the most basic processes of life itself. Pursuit of the arts quite literally *is* a desire to evolve and change, a desire to live.

We must make room for the arts if we are to be taken seriously about our stated intention to live sustainably on this Earth. If we claim that our New Society is life-affirming and enhancing, we need to ask ourselves, “How are the arts being affirmed, honored and encouraged?”

## IMMEDIATISM AND THE LIVE, PARTICIPATORY ARTS

*“Art is not art if it merely decorates the coffee tables of the rich.” --unknown....*

At this point I would like to draw a distinction between improvisational dance, theater, storytelling, music and song—the live, participatory arts—and other art, trade and artisan forms such as painting, photography, writing, weaving, carpentry, gardening, etc. I distinguish between these not to devalue other art forms, but rather to emphasize the unique benefits the live arts have to offer us. To be sure, all art forms have important roles to play, and none of them are duly respected and remunerated in modern society. But I would like also to acknowledge the particular oppression of the live arts in our consumer culture, since they are very difficult to commodify. We cannot typically hang these arts on the wall, nor put them in our CD player, nor sell them in the market.

I have used the terms *live, participatory, improvisational, and bodybased* arts interchangeably in this essay, and I would like now to add the term *immediate arts* to this list. The concept of *Immediatism*—a term coined by author Hakim Bey—will be especially valuable to explore here (see *Immediatism*, AK Press, 1994.) The “live” arts are powerful because they are happening in the moment, and are experienced directly. There is no media between the art, the artist, and the viewer. Hence the term *im-mediate*, meaning both “now” and “no media.”

Consider a painting, for example, which you are admiring at a museum. In order for you to see this painting, the artist must first conceive the idea for the painting. After the idea, comes the paint, the brush, the canvas. Afterwards, the painting is sold to the gallery, where it is then sold to the buyer. It then hangs on the wall of someone’s home or a museum, where people may or may not have the chance to see it. How many layers of media stand between the artist and the viewer? Between the concept and the canvas? At each successive layer of media, there exists a greater and greater possibility of something becoming “lost in translation,” especially when monetary exchange can often involve censorship.

The fact that live, participatory arts cannot easily be materially commodified, measured, or quantified is one reason why they are consistently undervalued by our society. Some artists can earn money selling a painting, sculpture, rug, or basket of fruit, but since performing artists offer little “product to take home” it is difficult to make a living in a society that places value almost exclusively on material goods. Performing dancers and actors, once occupying central roles in tribal cultures, are today arguably the lowest paid and least appreciated of all artists—maybe even all professions—in modern society, and might even be considered a type of endangered species.

Yet, this *immediate* quality is precisely the reason the live arts can be so valuable to us in trying to build a New Society. Exclusion from the marketplace has certainly suppressed the immediate arts, but at the same time, immediate artists are therefore much more free from the competitive and materialist pressures of the marketplace. By practicing these arts, we are offered a glimpse of a what a world based on cooperation, rather than

commercialism, might look like, a perspective which can be difficult to find these days. Since anyone and everyone can experience the live arts for themselves, at no cost, there are far fewer opportunities for a consumerist culture to taint, co-opt or enlist this type of art for its own agenda.

## **ZONEZERO—THE BODYREMEDICATION PROCESS**

*'Life did not take over the planet by combat, but by networking.'* -Fritjof Capra

Another essential contribution to the cause of New Village building comes from the experience of freedom and creativity that occurs when we practice the live, participatory arts. In order to create a society free from all forms of oppression, we must have a firsthand experience of Freedom and a method for the practice of our own liberation. The live, bodybased arts are crucial to this liberation practice.

The imposition of the grid, and of Domestic, City, State and National boundaries during the industrialization of our modern nation-states was done with complete disregard for the natural boundaries of landscape, watershed, valley, forest, river. In the same way, this grid has also been imposed—in the name of mechanization, industrialization and militarization—upon our bodies and minds in complete disregard for their natural functions.

Just as we practice bioremediation to heal the biosphere, the “industrialization of the body” can be healed through *bodyremediation* techniques. The live, bodybased arts are an integral part of this bodyremediation process

Think of the well-meaning ecological designer at a green architecture firm, for instance. How can this person begin to think creatively outside the box, when he wakes each day to the digital pulse of an alarm clock, sits for eight hours a day in a cubicle, within a square building, staring into a squarish monitor? If there is music playing in the background of this scene, chances are it is in 4/4 time—yet another box. His body experiences nothing but the box, and in this box, it becomes very difficult for him to experience that flow of creativity and innovation which science itself has recognized to be the basis for evolution and change. We've known for decades that it isn't hip to be square, now we must make sure that we design a way out of the box.

Also consider of the forms of movement which are publicly acceptable in our culture: walking and jogging in straight lines only, sitting at a steering wheel or desk with fingers, hands and eyes moving only, sitting on a couch with hands and eyes moving only. That's pretty much it! If you doubt the truth of this statement, why not try your own little informal sociological experiment? Next time you are in a public space, try reciting a poem, doing a short dance or even some yoga, in an airport perhaps to loosen up after a long flight, or at a mall after long day on your feet. I predict that people will stare at you,

in shock, in disdain, in curiosity. And if you continue long enough, Security will approach to escort you out (yes, I have learned this the hard way).

From its humble origins in the sea billions of years ago, life has diversified and spread across the Earth by following the strategy of sheer abundance. Quite simply, Life “covers its bases” by having billions upon billions of options available to deal with any changes that arise, and this is how it evolves through the ages. If humans are to continue to adapt to inevitable changes, we must follow nature’s lead. We must reverse the trends towards homogenization of movement and expression by dissolving the grid and reclaiming our natural bodies. When we cultivate the ability to move and express ourselves in a diversity of ways, we make ourselves and our species strong.

### **THE INQUISITION AND THE COLONIZATION OF THE BODY**

In order to reclaim our bodies and our communities we must follow the basic principles of nature in which diversity ensures strength and resilience in any system. Indigenous peoples recognize this basic diversity principle, and have many ritual and healing practices which cultivate and preserve diversity of the body, the voice, and the mind.

Yet, during the days of the inquisition and witch hunts in Europe, all kinds of people who possessed valuable knowledge about the Earth, the healing herbs, and the human body including dancers and actors, were decryed to have the “devil” in them and were hunted down, tortured and killed. Those of us of European descent carry the legacy of this violence and repression in our bodies. Into our cellular memory was driven the information that to be caught dancing was to be killed. We need to reteach our bodies that it is okay and even critical for us to move again, reclaiming our right to move freely and uninhibited by convention.

To this day, people who step away from the extremely narrow range of culturally accepted movement and touch are considered “crazy” and are ridiculed, rejected and even straitjacketed and drugged. I believe this is one of the reasons why our culture is so obsessed with sex. When we engage in sexual activity, we experience one of the only culturally-sanctioned opportunities to move our bodies in ways that are expressive, instinctual, experimental.

If people were free to move as they were inspired, and if the varieties of publicly accepted touch were expanded beyond a handshake or slap on the back, there would be fewer cases of STDs, fewer unwanted pregnancies, fewer barroom brawls, and fewer advertisements using bikini-clad women to sell lawnmowers. Given the limited options permissible for touch and movement in modern culture, people can easily confuse violent, aggressive, or sexual urges with the urge to *move*, or to be touched, held, or hugged. Practices such as release-style movement and contact improvisation, which involve partnering, are wonderful ways of reclaiming touch and movement as our birthright.

### **INFOTOXINS – THE POLLUTION OF THE MENTAL ENVIRONMENT**

We are unfortunately all too familiar with the effects of chemicals and pollutants in our air, lakes, streams, groundwater, soils. But how many of us realize that our *mental environment* has become just as polluted? *Adbusters: Journal of the Mental Environment* is a magazine that is dedicated to examining the effect of runaway media upon human health. In the 2004 issue “*Systematically Distorted Information*,” *Adbusters* points out that the advertising is a \$450 billion worldwide industry which exposes the average American to 3,000 commercial messages a day.

All people, especially children, are hardwired to absorb crucial information that arises from the grassroots. For example, messages about which foods to eat and which to avoid, about specific routes to cross mountains or deserts were passed on through songs, memes, rhymes. This information has the ability to sweep across the continent in much the same way as a children’s rhyme moves from coast to coast with no organization, no advertising, no newspapers, or television.

It is quite natural for us to absorb the information around us. This is why it is not surprising that studies are showing most children in the US cannot identify even five species of plants, but can recognize hundreds of corporate logos!

what happens when the memes no longer rise from the bottom, but ooze down from the top—from ad agencies and PR firms and the commercial mass media? The mindscape is plunged into chaos. ...cultural power is dislocated, authenticity and spontaneity lost...Ideas spread not when people interact, but when they switch on their TVs and computers. (*Adbusters*, Vol.12, No. 1).

It is possible that we are being bombarded with so much information, most of it being completely irrelevant to our basic human needs, that it resembles pollution more than it resembles information. This pollution has recently been given a name: *infotoxins*. Our brains begin to shut down as our mental pasture is overgrazed, and there is no room left for us to receive messages critical to the sustainability of our species. Infotoxins may be just as dangerous to human beings as water or air pollution.

Here, again, is where the bodybased arts can serve us. Improvisational art games require nothing except a few people gathered together, they are fun to play, and they cost nothing. To find entertainment, we can choose not to seek out TVs or engage in other consumer activities which expose us to seemingly endless streams of advertisements, and choose instead to entertain ourselves. This frees up valuable “mental real estate” creating much needed open spaces in our minds, leaving room for creative thought instead of the prepackaged version. In practicing the participatory arts, we are literally freeing our minds. And if we play enough, we can cancel the gym membership, too!

## **THE TYRANNY OF THE TALENTED (or, Practice Makes Perfect)**

*“The artist is not a special sort of person, but each person is a special sort of artist.”*

*--A.K. Coomaraswamy*

When we gather to participate in the live, improvisational arts, we do not expect that there will be “experts” or “virtuosos” to do the dancing or the acting for us. Each of us acknowledges the wealth of material that naturally exists inside of us, and seeks simply to uncover it, consistently dissolving the internal Critic and Censor implanted in us by a society overly-focused on control. Each of us takes the responsibility for experiencing art for ourselves, recognizing the notion that art is only for the “talented” as a lie. Art is a practice and a learned skill, not a mysterious gift given only to a precious few. And, like any skill, the more we practice, the better we become at doing it.

We recognize that if the community is to benefit, we cannot continue to hand over our intuitive sense of health and how to heal, of right and wrong, of aesthetics and innovation—in short, we cannot continue to hand over our power to “the experts.” We must trust ourselves to act now, individually and in community, on our own behalves. This is end of the age of the expert, and the beginning of the age of the intuitive and the cooperative.

## **MASTERY AND SLAVERY**

There is nothing wrong with becoming good at something and sharing those skills. Indeed, this is how we teach and learn from each other. Neither is there anything inherently wrong with virtuosity or mastery of an art or craft. Even the most achieved guitar “master” in the world, for example, may admit that they have learned only a small fraction of what it possible on the guitar. The problem lies in the recent historical association of virtuosity and mastery with slavery.

Modern society all too often prizes extreme specialization to the exclusion of wholism and well-roundedness, and expects a person to deny their basic human right to engage in a diversity of activities during their day, and during their lifetimes. In an extreme pursuit of knowledge in their specialty, many experts reduce their focus so drastically that they lose sight of the big picture. Many contemporary ethical debates—over nuclear testing, cloning and genetic modification, weapons profiteering, etc.—are related to the myopia associated with specialization. Knowledge which floats up and away from the complexities and the realities of the grounded whole becomes dangerous, just as a knife can be either a useful tool or a destructive weapon.

We must all begin to trust the knowledge that we have innately, especially when it comes to our own bodies. The truth is, nobody knows more about how to teach or heal yourself than you do, and no master—be they guru, sensei, Ph.D, lawyer or priest—can heal or teach you anything without your cooperation. When we practice the improvisational arts, we affirm the great value—and great responsibility—of our own experience, and deep trust in ourselves.

## **CONCLUSION**

Any community truly dedicated to wholism and sustainability must recognize the equal importance of the sciences, the trades, and arts of all kinds. As New Villagers, we must strive to dissolve outdated, dysfunctional hierarchies among disciplines and encourage creative crosspollination, revering the arts right along with the sciences. Continued undervaluing of the essential teachings that the various intuitive practices and arts have for each of us and our communities would be a Type One error—one which makes all future endeavors towards sustainability nearly impossible.

Radical experimentation with diversity in movement, story, and song—both personally and in community—is now especially important in order to reveal crucial information for how we can heal ourselves from unsustainable societal patterns. Improvisational and participatory arts as a practice in the studio, on the stage, and around the campfire better prepares us to improvise in life. And improvisation is a skill that will become more and more valuable as the pace of climate, social, and technological change continues to accelerate. New Villagers must follow precedents already established by natural law and indigenous peoples, and restore the creative, immediate arts to a central place in our community designs. Nothing less than the preservation of the human race is at stake.

*The universe wants to play. Those who refuse out of dry spiritual greed & choose pure contemplation forfeit their humanity—those who refuse out of dull anguish, those who hesitate, lose their chance at divinity—those who mold themselves blind masks of Ideas & thrash around seeking some proof of their own solidity end by seeing out of dead men's eyes.*

— Hakim Bey

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