

Kathleen Caprario

In August, 2015, Kathleen Caprario spent ten days as an artist in residence at the HJ Andrews Experimental Forest. H.J. Andrews is a 16,000-acre ecological research site in Oregon's beautiful western Cascades Mountains. These notes were made during that time of reflection and research.

LOG DECOMP THOUGHTS... HJA August 6, 2015

Decomposition and renewal. That's what it's all about. What is considered waste and detritus is the foundation for succession, the new, the future. What is old, then dies and, in its demise, becomes repurposed, reborn and the basis for future generations of life and biological innovation. That's what I call "karma" in action. Transformation, metamorphosis, symbiosis, interdependence—they're all there and richly in play. But what if we don't understand or perceive that value? What if we can't see, can't hear or appreciate the benefit because of our limited set of experiences, interests and values?

Value is based in an understanding and recognized benefit that awards merit. The patterns and systems in nature that we understand are those that are generally found useful to humans and thus valued. Those patterns and systems that can be perceived in human terms, produce human benefit, create human profit and can be controlled by humans are most valued.

But, what if the greatest value to be had is beyond the scope of human understanding, a quick reward and the individual experience? What if the benefit is not always immediate and conspicuous but sustains humanity, just the same? We often do not recognize the systems and patterns of organization in nature; patterns that have a scope and duration that is outside of our generation's lifespan or cultural aesthetic. We may have the ability to look back far into the past but are limited in imagining the future. How has that lack of long-range vision influenced the criteria used to assign value? Who has traditionally and culturally made that determination? Is the matrix for assigning worth outdated, false or corrupt? Who do we value and does the system through which we evaluate and consider merit favor certain groups and points of view to the detriment and exclusion of others, including the environment?

Perhaps a entire new system for cataloging and assigning merit should be developed that reflects heretofore under represented groups and global concerns. We must question every assumption of merit and understand the groups and points of view that have traditionally benefitted from past systems, as well as our own assumption of and complicity in those systems' persistence.

How can we determine a new, more inclusive and true value system, a system that extends over generations and is inclusive? How do patterns—of human behavior and of the physical world—encode the systems of interdependence that social groups and their successful habitation of the environment, depend upon? Can we value beauty and curiosity as a useful and a critical part of being human?

Can we?

BIO DIVERSITY...HJA August 8, 2015

We are an invasive species. As we alter the land, we alter the culture and ourselves; our collective and individual existence and beliefs are inexorably coupled with the environment, its patterns and well-being.

Biodiversity is an important part of what makes life livable on Earth. The value of ecological and cultural diversity plays out both actually and metaphorically within a society. Cultural occupation--through war, genocide, geographic expansion and the imposition of the dominant groups beliefs and customs--is similar to the encroachment of non-native species that take root and threaten whole eco-systems. The often tenuous balance between industry, human desire and the environment is a drama currently played out on ecological stages world-wide.

The systems and matrices that regulate and sustain a healthy eco-existence favor variation and interdependence within species and habitats. Invading species that dominate or eradicate native and cooperative populations limit diversity and often create unsustainable environments of homogenous populations that encourage disease and potential extinction. Similarly, a healthy human population also displays diverse characteristics and behaviors identified as cooperative, fair, inclusive and just.

The question is—can we play “nice” with one another in the same way that the invertebrates of the forest floor work side-by-side and contribute toward turning a 500-year old log into soil and provide for the ongoing sustainability of not only themselves, their species, but the entire ecosystem?

We better.

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW... HJA August 8, 2015

(based off of a conversation with artist, Leah Wilson and her husband, Tim Haley)

The information kiosk, part-ways up the road toward the “Discovery Trail” at HJA is, for all practical intent and purpose, unfinished and, therefore, without function. The information boards are blank.

It’s perfect.

Everything you need to know is all around you—just take a moment and you’ll know I’m right. I propose designating the unfinished kiosk as a complete and finished piece of conceptual art titled, “Everything You Need To Know.” Period.

I further propose that beautifully constructed, blank information kiosks be erected throughout the National Forests and other recreation and tourist areas with small labels that read, “Everything You Need To Know.” Simple, clean, efficient.

Figure it out.

BASIC DESIGN...HJA August 9, 2015

“Pretty as a picture,” the saying goes. “Now that’s a postcard view, for you.” Snap, click, take the photo and keep it moving. Humans consume nature as they do everything else—the experience of the outdoors is commodified and packaged into just the right amount, per serving. Just enough to feel satisfied and to check off the old “Bucket List,” but not so much as to become distracted from whatever agenda is really in the driver’s seat of “The Self.” Because, when you get right down to it, it’s all about “us.” Or is it?

The “or is it?” part opens up a proverbial can of worms, millipedes and any of the thousands of arthropods that are productively underfoot turning logs into soil and the ground we stand our bipedal-selves upon into a dense, rich and dynamic organic mass, teeming with more life than we can safely imagine from the comfort of our Shutterfly account online. We are not alone—just look down at the dirt.

Is there a “grand scheme” or can we see some “Creator’s Hand” in all of this? I know folks who truly believe that when they view a magnificent landscape they are witnessing proof of “God’s Design.” I want to ask, but am too polite, which, whose god? Do you refer to the ancient gods of classic myth, animistic and indigenous spirit guides or one from the monotheist playbook? Perhaps a more recent entry from “Burning Man?” Too many gods, so little time...

There is design out there, but I sure don’t feel confident about attributing it to some “artist in the sky.” I don’t mean to be too much of a smart-aleck, but you really want an artist in charge of the universe? Artists are generally considered suspect in most situations and they rarely have good retirement plans. Plus, the

general public doesn't much care for artists. If you don't believe me, just look at public arts budgets across this country—they've been in the tank for years.

Let's look at the definition of design. Wikipedia, a popular source for information tells us that design is:

"...the creation of a plan or convention for the construction of an object or a system..."

I'll buy that. It's a little bland, but o.k., like low-sodium, Saltine crackers. However, I really like the 20th c. Bauhaus idea that design is a Process (note, the capital "P") that begins with:

- A. a Problem
- B. Iteration
- C. a Solution
- D. Proving that solution to be true or discovering a new problem and beginning the entire process over again. Yeah!

Think of a 21st century Sisyphus (perhaps with blue hair and body piercings) pushing different boulders—purple, hexagonal, striped, you name it—up "Mount Innovation," over and over and over again—and having a blast. That's what a designer does day in and day out. Some even get paid. Amazing.

I like to think of design as a biological imperative, a survival mechanism that we humans, because of our increasingly cushy lifestyle, can identify and engage in as "Art." I posit that humans must do two things, apart from the basic physical needs and texting—we must:

- A. Organize

...and then...

- B. Make Meaning

That's design. Pure and simple.

Ellen Dissanayake is an independent scholar focusing on "the anthropological exploration of art and culture." In the forward to her book, "Homo Aestheticus," she states:

"At first glance, the fact that the arts and related aesthetic attitudes vary so widely from one society to another would seem to suggest that they are wholly learned or 'cultural' in origin rather than, as I will show, also biological or 'natural.' One can make an analogy with language: learning to speak is a universal, innate predisposition for all children even though individual children learn the particular language of the people among whom they are nurtured. Similarly, art can be regarded as a natural, general proclivity that manifests itself in culturally learned specifics such as dances, songs, performances, visual display, and poetic speech."

So, if it can be stated with some agreement that humans must organize and then must make meaning and use out of all that organized "stuff," how does nature influence, necessitate, inspire and provide the context for that realization and subsequent aesthetic, art-making?

Now that's a design problem.

JUSTICE BEGINS AT HOME...August 11, 2015

It's all about the trees. Especially the really big ones. From seed to standing and then back to soil they are the "Energizer Bunnies" of planet Earth. The big trees provide the physical context and a model for cooperation between otherwise different and competing interest groups that populate the forest.

At first thought, all of that parallel play and mutual benefit seems like a utopian dream and the perfect organizational system that we, humans, might adopt as a corrective for our societal waste, greed and inefficiencies. At first thought...

Nature's hierarchy is based on evolutionary cause and effect rather than the acquisition of power and resources through intentional and often violent means. The food chain is not based on prejudice or greed, but need, order and ultimately, sustainability. Sounds o.k. Better and saner than what's currently happening in Syria, The Ukraine, Palestine or, for that matter, many US cities—Charleston, Ferguson—the list goes on. However, here's the catch—the different species that inhabit the forest, despite their symbiotic relationships and synchronicity of behaviors, are separate and essentially segregated. Uh, oh, now that's a problem.

"Separate but Equal," had its day as a social model that held on to the privileges and benefits for certain groups at the expense, oppression and violence against others. In the long term, short term, any term—it was a really bad idea both in theory and practice. We still suffer the effects of its fear-fed, historic origins.

Does that mean that we need to throw out the birds, invertebrates and all four-legged mammals with the proverbial bath water when looking for a successful model of cooperation for ourselves? Perhaps we humans need to identify a different criteria when separating into groups rather than the old racial, religious, gender, national or class divisions.

What if we organized ourselves around how we can help each other and, as a natural consequence, ourselves? Imagine the social ecosystem we could create.

What if...