

Introduction

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We have lost the pleasure of being together. Thirty years of precariousness and competition have destroyed social solidarity. Media virtualization has destroyed empathy among bodies, the pleasure of touching each other, and the pleasure of living in urban spaces. We have lost the pleasure of love, because too much time is devoted to work and virtual exchange.

—Berardi and Lovnik¹

Sometimes four or five heads of college art departments lived on the farm, combining intensive work with the quiet recreations of country life... The abundant nature around us presented an unending variety of form and function... Mushrooms, fungi, wasps' nests, fragments of shell from bird's eggs, piled up on shelves and tables and rotted quietly in the hot summer air. They were magnificent photographic material. A cabbage leaf, eaten into intricate designs by a caterpillar, was as fascinating as a tangle of rusted wire on a slab of limestone. The wooden floors in the old house had worn hollow, the hard substance of the wood showing like the veins on an old hand. Moholy was fascinated by this process of wood attrition, and, with pencil, crayon, and colored chalk, he did rubbings on paper and canvas to study the texture and the rhythm of line and color.

—Sibyl Moholy-Nagy²

A master in the art of living draws no sharp distinction between his work and his play; his labor and his leisure; his mind and his body; his education and

his recreation. He hardly knows which is which. He simply pursues his vision of excellence through whatever he is doing, and leaves others to determine whether he is working or playing. To himself, he always appears to be doing both.

—Lawrence Pearsall Jacks³

An immersive life practice is not quite the same as life. A little bit different, it has to do with the intersection of image-making and living. Intentional life choices about how to live and relate to others are accompanied by challenges about controlling and directing the symbolic potential of those choices. The limitations and possibilities of these individual and social prefigurative acts, enacting life as a symbol of possibilities, are the subject of this exploration.

While I know neither of them well, there are two people that I have encountered in the last five years that have greatly influenced how I think about an immersive life practice. Working at distinct ends of the urban/rural continuum, one is Grace Lee Boggs of Detroit, the other Joe Hollis of Burnsville, North Carolina. The words of Boggs and Hollis serve as poles that help me to consider the examples described in this book. And while neither are artists, both of them touch in different ways on their commitment to communicating their values through image making—offering a reminder that an inquiry into the history of socially engaged art should point as much back towards the expanses of social life as to the specificity of art history.

Five years ago I left both Chicago and my practice of organizing and documenting political art projects and took a trip across the US to visit and interview farmers who were engaged in a mix of sustainable food production and social justice activism.⁴ The visits, organized with my collaborators Amy Francescini and Anne Hamersky, required a lot of preparation: researching the people to be interviewed, sometimes calling around to get second opinions from journalists, activists, or farmers that I knew in the area to see if the faint impressions I had gathered might match reality. At every stop we'd spend at least half a day with the farmer or organization, and typically carry on side conversations with their collaborators or neighbors to get some sense of their work in context. Sometimes there were tours; sometimes they put me to work; and very often there were farm-fresh meals with friends and family. During every visit we sat with the group or individual to try to get a sense of their practice in their own words, trying to sift self-representation from misrepresentation.

On one visit I met a medicinal herb farmer in the mountains of North Carolina named Joe Hollis. For thirty years he had been striving to embody his manifesto of Paradise Gardening and that is what drew me to him: I wanted to include someone in the book that had a handmade ideology that

guided their life's work. Stepping onto Hollis's land was like entering a fantasy novel, with hand-bent wooden and fiber archways, winding pathways, and patches of beautiful plant life unfamiliar to me. The architecture was built into the slope and included yurts and A-frames, with a central building functioning as a library, lab, pharmacy, and outdoor kitchen. Perusing the thousands of books on his shelf, the spectrum impressed me: classics of existentialist, left-wing anarchist and socialist thought, mingled with poetry, anthropology, botany, and guides to all sorts of tools, technology, and ornamental garden design.

After several hours of exploring the land and meeting his collaborators, Hollis finally invited me to sit, and we began our interview. He covered some of the basics of his work, land, and history before I asked him to talk about Paradise Gardening. After explaining the fundamentals of a minimal money economy, less harm to the earth, and egalitarian human relations, I urged him to address his conception of this practice in relationship to democracy and access. It seemed important to him to be modeling a certain kind of behavior in the world that would communicate to others his value system. That made me curious about his approach to outreach; how was inviting others in and sharing the work important to him? He stunned me with his candor by explaining that he gets frustrated talking about the work when he could be doing it: "Every time I sit down with someone like you or give a tour, that is that many more minutes that I am not perfecting my life philosophy." He went on, "I could just do 100 percent my Paradise Garden, and it would be better than it is. On the other hand, the whole point for me is the outreach, to try to influence people. There is always that back-and-forth."

It seemed that Hollis had found himself bumping against a problem similar to that of socially engaged artists. His concern for what constituted the work and what constituted its representation—how they could serve or detract from one another—seems particularly pertinent to both artists and activists who want to prefigure the world they want to live in, while also make images and things that resonate with and extend their visions. His dilemma's correlation to a perennial art problem exceeded the parameters of that particular project, and I was excited to move from farming back into art to be take it up in another context, perhaps drawing from the insights artists from my home in Chicago could bring to bear. Over time these concerns have nagged me and became the basis for this inquiry into immersive life practices which grapple with the relationship between doing and representing one's work in the context of one's own life.

Grace Lee moved to Chicago from New York in 1940, attracted to the possibility of following in the footsteps of philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey and founder of social psychology George Herbert

Mead, both of whom had left New England for Chicago. Having just completed a PhD in Philosophy, she was drawn to be near the University of Chicago. What she ended up encountering was not an academic course of study in pragmatism, but a crash course in cross-racial solidarity and organizing. Living in a slum basement in Hyde Park, Lee joined together with a tenant's organization fighting for poor and black people's rights to housing without rat infestation. Despite only staying for two years, her move from academia to activism exemplified what had attracted her to Mead and inspired in her the transition from "a life of contemplation to a life of action." It echoed, too, what John Dewey had written in 1899 in *The School and Society* when he suggested that schools needed to prepare young people to constructively and actively engage in society. Thus, Lee's experience in Chicago gave her the tools to begin a life of deep engagement within African American communities and with the questions of evolving human experience and social relations.⁵

Lee continued this work when she moved to Detroit, where she would meet and marry her intellectual life partner, James Boggs, a black auto worker and political theorist. Boggs's thinking was informed by his factory-floor observations about the changing technology of work and the implications that it had for those outsiders "pushed out of the system by the system itself."⁶ In his 1963 forward-thinking manifesto Boggs beautifully outlined this analysis, explaining that "When a country reaches the stage that this country has now reached, productivity can no longer be the measure of an individual's right to life.... Once it is recognized that all men have the right to a full life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, whether they are working or not working, have worked or have not worked, it will be necessary for society to create a completely new set of values."⁷

Building on her husband's analysis of changing labor conditions in the 1960s and Dewey's writings on school reform at the turn of the nineteenth century, Grace Lee Boggs wrote in her memoir:

Yet rather than wrestle with such grim realities, too many Americans have become self-centered and overly materialistic, more concerned with our possessions and individual careers than with the state of our neighborhoods, cities, country, and planet, closing our eyes and hearts to the many forms of violence that have been exploding in our inner cities and in powder kegs all over the rest of the world. Because the problems seem so insurmountable and because just struggling for our own survival consumes so much of our time and energy, we view ourselves as victims rather than embrace the power within us to change our reality.... Still, it becomes clearer every day that organizing or joining massive

protests and demanding new policies fail to sufficiently address the crisis we face. They may demonstrate that we are on the right side politically, but they are not transformative enough. They do not change the cultural images or the symbols that play such a pivotal role in molding us into who we are... Instead of putting our organizational energies into begging Ford and General Motors to stay in Detroit—or begging the government to keep them afloat—so that they can continue to exploit us, we need to go beyond traditional capitalism. Creating new forms of community-based institutions (e.g., co-ops, small businesses, and community development corporations) will give us ownership and control over the way we make our living, while helping us to ensure that the well-being of the community and the environment is part of the bottom line...This kind of organizing takes a lot of patience because changing people and people changing themselves requires time.⁸

The practices described by Hollis and Boggs, as well as those presented in this book, all aspire toward a less-alienated way of life that can combine internal and external social transformation. They take seriously some of the lessons from past efforts at redistribution of resources cited by Boggs in her discussion of making demands from government and industry, but combine them with her idea about changing the images and symbols that mold “us into who we are.” In this sense, these immersive life practices can be seen as a marriage of redistribution and representation, of the work and the image of the work, of politics and ethics. Of course, such a marriage is not without contradictions and tensions—many of which are outlined in the texts that follow.

This book can be read against this backdrop of a global economic and ecological crisis, when many artists are considering not just how to live but what to live for. By creating a framework for looking at these practices and historically contextualizing them, my hope is to distill the larger challenges and possibilities we face when considering what opportunities for reassessment lay within this historical moment. As with any framework, the connections do not account for all the motivations driving these practices. In my selection of new essays and reprinted content, there was an attempt to more fully develop what such a conceptual framework can offer. In bringing together endurance performance practices and antagonistic public art with ecological art and domestic experiments, I hope to avoid posing the concept of immersive life practices as a cool lifestyle project that is simply inaccessible to most people. At the same time, through recuperating some surprising or less obvious histories into the framework, the book offers more of an eclectic range of references than any tidy genre could account for.

The texts in *Life in Context*, the introductory section to this book, provide a grounding for the overall inquiry. Ben Nicholson and Heather Radke's essays on historical cooperative experiments can be considered alongside the examples from the early twenty-first century explored by Brian Holmes in his investigation of the many forms of precarity structuring contemporary ways of life. The inclusion of a reprinted essay by Myles Horton reminds us of the role of model-making for inspiring projects that take place elsewhere, as he absorbs Chicago and Danish inspiration for the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee, founded in 1932 and operating today. Bookending the whole publication, Claire Pentecost derives keywords from both her imagination and her reading of the texts in this book, drawing from the commune-like retreat centers to the artistic interventions in domestic and public spheres, her glossary engages the pressing and challenging questions about how to live as it is explored through the art and activism in these pages.

Inspired by my attempts to interrogate the self-representations of the farmers in my previous book, the subsequent three thematic sections each combine critical essays, collected project documentation, and ephemera, along with a number of narratives and interviews. First-person reflections weave throughout the sections as a reminder that these kinds of practices cannot easily be accounted for by looking at a particular work or object, but in many ways mirror the tradition of immersion journalism in which the authors' biography and personality, intentionally or not, becomes an important element for understanding the art's meaning.

Building on the foundation of the introductory section, *Ways of Living* deals directly with the ethics and choices people have made to live their lives in particular ways, often in response to external problems. A counterpoint to the self-centered and overly materialistic personal choices described above by Boggs, these practices show what other life choices can offer within the larger social-context.

The communication of the individual with the social world is extended in the next section, *Life On Stage*, which presents work that is self-conscious about its role in conveying a social problem, performing it as a means of heightening awareness. In these examples much of the story is contained within the physical body of the performer. To me, this concern with the symbolic function of the creators themselves parallels Joe Hollis's tension between doing and telling about his work that I described.

Passing Time Together, the final section, expands that focus on the body into the realm of mortality and aging. These examples deal with both life and death, as well as the role that time plays in the artists' relationships with others. Recalling Boggs's description of the time it takes to create change, this section celebrates the longevity of practices that illustrates

what can uniquely happen when people commit themselves to a community or collaborator.

Though often difficult to see or depict from the outside, these practices contain lessons about the value of work, commitment, ethics, and ecological relationships that the larger field of socially engaged arts and social justice activism could benefit from understanding better. Through the lens of immersive life practices, a range of concerns about art and society can be explored that move beyond celebrations of the entrepreneurial spirit of artists. Beyond making a living, how are artists making ways of living and negotiating ongoing philosophical questions of how to live holistically with others? And how do efforts at merging individual expression with deeply engaged social life arise when pursuing the formal question of how to represent a never-ending project that exceeds the documentation strategies, organizational forms, and codification that most institutions can capture? And finally, how do all these challenges converge when considering the pragmatic questions of how to balance work and leisure, where to locate oneself and one's energies, and what to prioritize and with whom.

While the rationalization of time since the industrial revolution has inspired generations to grapple with the manic pace and attention life demands, the commodification of lifestyles since the dawn of the service economy has introduced new concerns about how to live. Many of the experiments in this book involve making space for concentrated time, contemplation, and alternate realities apart from daily life, and reflect a desire for breathing room from the more overwhelming aspects of living. Every day we become mired in the facts of life: the environments we inhabit and move through, clothes we wear, time we manage, time we lose, people we encounter, family we care for, and responsibilities we tend to. While these daily stresses are a given for many, people I know feel maxed out with obligations, commitments, and responsibilities. The encroachment of networked computers into all facets of home and work life, the need for slowing down, unplugging, attentiveness, retreat, and mindfulness have merged into the modern quest for what we call work/life balance. With the uneven distribution of "time off" and most of our time spent working, leisure time can seem of the utmost importance and the location of the greatest tension, because of the increasing lack of distinction between these two kinds of time.

Though we might have our own aspirational version of paradise gardens, we also most likely have a day job or two. Far from being parallel or apart, our destinies as paradise gardeners and our daily grinds are intertwined. Attempts to self actualize and improve the conditions of our individual lives without concern for the social world in which we all live easily reveals the limits of breaking free of capitalist social and economic

organization on a loan life raft. Alternately, attempts to address this disjuncture often advocate pragmatic solutions that could redistribute society's resources more equitably, but, uninspiringly, lack the paradise gardner's vision of other ways of living.

Critical perspectives are needed to consider the organization of time, individual career maintenance, social fragmentation, precarious work conditions, and uneven distribution of wealth and poverty that create impediments to immersive practices today. Those practices today that are willing to see the personal question of one's time commitments re-formulated as a social problem (requiring a social solution) are operating in the long tradition of reimagining what constitutes the work of our lives.

Artists live out these symptoms and often reflect on these tensions. Could we do more to interrogate them? While a great deal of energy has gone into theorizing and documenting art that interacts with daily life, I wonder, what about art concerned with how to live? We need desperately to push beyond the limits of the already-existing discourses dealing with art's relation to social life and of utopian visions in the face of pragmatic solutions. I hope the immersive life practices in this book will contribute insight into the potential for artistic tactics and image making to inform strategies for living together—a challenge at the very basis of politics and life.

1 Franco “Bifo” Berardi and Geert Lovink, July 1, 2013, “On #Occupy: A call to the Army of Love and to the Army of Software,” *Revolution by the Book: The AK Press Blog*, October 12 2011, <http://www.revolutionbythebook.akpress.org/on-occupy-franco-bifo-berardi-and-geert-lovink/>.

2 Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Moholy-Nagy: Experiment in Totality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969). Remembering the School of Design “Summer Camp” on a farm sixty-five miles outside of Chicago, started in 1939 as an out – growth of László Moholy-Nagy’s The New Bauhaus (later to merge with Illinois Institute of Technology).

3 Lawrence Pearsall Jacks, *Education Through Recreation* (New York: Harper, 1932), 1.

4 The results of this collaboration were published in a book, *Farm Together Now* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2010). The edited interview with Joe Hollis from Paradise Gardens makes up the entire 8th chapter of the book.

5 Grace Lee Boggs, *Living For Change: An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 33–43.

6 James Boggs, *Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party* (Philadelphia: Pacesetters Publishing House, 1969).

7 James Boggs, *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker’s Notebook* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1963/2009), 46–47.

8 Grace Lee Boggs, *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 28–51.