



# Essay

Of art and of land

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By Christine Fentz

## Something I Know about the Place I Live

The winds of March are quite particular. These warm storms are like the energy of a burly young horse or energetic teenager, still trying to navigate the growing limbs. When you meet these winds, it is like being pushed a bit, engulfed and ... pfuiii ... it is gone again. The winds of March carry an air of curiosity, like: What happens if I blow like this ...? Or like that?

Let me repeat, these winds are mild, compared to the temperatures of a normal northern winter. Not icy greetings from the vast plains of Siberia. Instead, these storms are lukewarm promises of the coming spring. As the days grow in length, we remember how the arriving mildness will feel.

I love their change of atmosphere. The reason why I write about these March winds is because I have become even more aware of their characteristics lately. I have known the place where I live for almost 40 years, and I have lived here 17 years. I have an accurate sense of observation, notice details, connections, and big temporal rhythms. However, these winds now come in ... January.

Yes.

Tangible signs of climate emergency.

## Two Legs

In this text I will draw a multi-faceted image of how sustainability comes into play in both my practice within performing arts as well as in my co-living with other types of 'people'. I work with embodied experiences, scientific knowledge and ethic reflection and I attempt to share my reflections with you here. I will present the work of my performing art company Secret Hotel<sup>1</sup>, the residency place Earthwise Residency<sup>2</sup>, as well as our biannual symposium *Earthbound* by diving into the values from which we work, and by sharing moments from living with the land.

You can read the text from start to end or jump between the chapters as you like.

Whether I work with bee buzzing, spring winds or the dramaturgy of a participatory performance, I see my practice as walking on two legs: One leg creating participatory performing art and another leg being a custodian caring for land and those who live there.

Secret Hotel creates performances with and about the more-than-human. Earthwise Residency invites artists and researchers for work periods sharing the same sphere of interest. Living in the unique landscape at Earthwise with my partner I and my team create various activities about care and sustainability. I work equally with Secret Hotel and Earthwise.

## Inviting Humans to Become Guests

Secret Hotel is a theatre without a 'house', but with 'rooms' of participatory performing art in various formats. Our performing art meets scientific research, and we create meetings and artwork across disciplines, species, borders, and work practices.

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1) [www.secrethotel.dk](http://www.secrethotel.dk)

2) [www.earthwise.dk](http://www.earthwise.dk)



Secret Hotel's work is rooted in our values about cocreation, care, sustainability, and respect. We always see and treat the audiences as our guests. We may tease them, or create some friction, but always with a precise intention.

In this interplay between values and foci we create performances that stimulate the audience's senses, bodies and minds and seek to enhance reflection and knowledge.

### **Relating to the Land**

Earthwise is an invitation to spend time with the living land at a place where art and research can entangle organically. You find us near Aarhus in Mols Bjerge National Park at an old farm with various options for interacting.<sup>3</sup> One is our ever-growing library of almost four hundred titles. Earthwise offers collaborations, calmness and space for humans who care about the interconnectedness of all who live on Planet Earth. Therefore, the work here is often interdisciplinary. We see meals, made of local produce, as a meeting place between humans, soil, and plants. Through relations, we decentre the human focus.



From a walk from Debate Weekend at Earthwise, 2014. Photo: Vitaly Vitalis

### **Core Values**

Care, consideration, and cooperation manifest in the way I care for the well-being of others, the ability to create balance as well as holding a safe space during conflicts and frictions. Care for the

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3) See more about the facilities of Earthwise: <https://earthwise.dk/ways-to-stay-here/>

old buildings, for artists, researchers and volunteers who co-live and co-work here. Transparency, respect, and honesty are also important values – intimately linked to our performances when we create a clear contract between performers and audiences.

Our collaborative praxis is always looking for sustainable solutions, on a practical level as well as in communication and interaction with others. It is present in the households, in growing food, purchasing produce, avoiding chemicals, rediscovering solutions from former generations, etc.

I personally have an animistic worldview rooted in the pre-Christian Nordic tradition, and this affects how I deal with the many types of people living here: The solitary bees, the honeybees<sup>4</sup>, bird people, horses, fireplaces, trees, hills ... Hence spirituality and a holistic lifestyle is part of our core, but without preaching. You may tap into it at our performances, you may ignore it, or not even register it.

### **Earthbound Symposium – the Two Legs Dancing**

Earthwise Residency is where my work is soil-based, while Secret Hotel interacts with the world through artistic expressions. At the international Earthbound symposia my whole 'work body' meets and dances with kindred spirits.

Every second year we dance by inviting artists, scholars, scientists, and other citizens to gather and examine the state of Planet Earth. *Earthbound* took place in 2018 and 2021, and hopefully happens again in 2023. We plan *Earthbound*<sup>5</sup> as an immersive experience, using knowledge from our performances. As we use well-developed methods from participatory performing arts, *Earthbound* can be categorised as a staged symposium, which engages both body and mind as Solveig Gade describes it here:

The more the *Earthbound*-symposium #1 in 2018 has settled in me, the more I have understood on how many levels the symposium changed usual traditions for practicing and sharing of knowledge. Partly because of its focus on indigenous practices it pushed conventional knowledge forms, yes pushed the borders of what legitimate knowledge is. [...] The format was groundbreaking and important because it taught us something about how we – not just in thinking, but also in practice – can relate to each other and the earth we inhabit, including all the more-than-human life [...].<sup>6</sup>

We approach it as a collaborative situation and expanded way of thinking, enabling participants to connect with each other's worldviews and research. An interdisciplinary meeting demands that people coming from different walks of life are carefully nudged to safely reach out and meet each other on a ground of mutual openness and curiosity.

For this to happen, we collaborate very consciously with some of the other people: The places, the soil where the food grows, microorganisms in the fermented food, flowers, straw balls, fire. This creates a heightened sensitivity and awareness of all those, whom we humans depend on, and in this way we can better develop mutual understandings and terminologies. The participants experience new perspectives and exit their comfort zones in ... comfortable ways.

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4) Bee families were traditionally named 'people' pr. beehive – folk – 'the tree people', 'the old queen people', etc.

5) Earthbound 2018: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgdGYKq\\_Jv4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgdGYKq_Jv4)  
Earthbound 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAt1Pj1I-v0>

6) Solveig Gade in mail correspondence, May 2022.



One of the foci of *Earthbound* is to feature indigenous researchers and artists. We strive to create a platform for sharing cultural and embodied wisdom as well as for curiosity regarding new insights and interdisciplinary learnings. The following quote from indigenous scholar Robin W. Kimmerer can perhaps shed light on how we can try to create a sane and collaborative culture of less conflict, dichotomies, and hierarchies, and instead cultivate fertile meetings and healthy co-growth:

“As a plant scientist, sometimes I am collecting data. As an indigenous plant woman, sometimes I am gathering medicine. These two roles offer a sharp contrast in ways of thinking, but I am always in awe, and always in relationship.” (Kimmerer 2022).



Part of the arrival meditation at Earthbound 2021, photo: Franseska Mortensen

## To the Ants

April 2021

Soon ready to go.  
The empty icebox with the hole cut in the lid  
The sucking tube with filter  
The vial with paraffin oil  
Ah, and an offering! Something sweet.  
Then, off to the pine tree & the dead elder.

It is still very chill in the mornings. The night temperature is often below zero. A new type of spring to adapt to, since a few years ... I am worried the ants will not be active this early. The dew in the grass is almost frozen.

As I walk further up the narrow valley, I hear a power chain saw and other powered tools – which are not supposed to be there. Such good timing that I came to meet the ants on this very morning, so I can find out what is going on!

The foresters are clearing the state-owned overgrown gorge in the valley further uphill. It lies between two softly rounded hills of land, of which I am the custodian. After 30 years here, I feel I belong to this land. Even more than what I recall from my childhood home amongst farmed fields.

The foreman and I have a pleasant talk. I brace myself for changes in my super privileged countryside life.



Jet Black Ants / Orangemyrer from Walking Lecture on Ants  
by Secret Hotel, 2017. Photo: Martin Dam Kristensen.

Human things partly settled; I turn towards the ants again. Arriving at the two intertwined trees I feel relieved: The ants are out and about.

I greet them and tell them that I've come to ask for some worker ants for our children's performance *Ant Business*. I place the gift by the entrance and prepare the equipment. I focus on the ants walking *upwards* on the stem of the dead and barkless elder tree. The ants walking *downwards* – some of them almost striped – are bringing honey dew to the anthill. It would weaken their society more if I took those loaded ladies instead. After all, only about half of the approximately sixty ants I will harvest, will return.



It is the first of several performances this year. Later also the original version *Walking Lecture on Ants* needs live ants. Today we will perform the first performance in almost one year since the pandemic began. It feels strange to be able to meet a big group of people. But what a joy!



Each guest of *Walking Lecture on Ants* gets to meet an ant close-up  
Photo: Martin Dam Kristensen.

When I return the next evening with the ants who were not eaten by adventurous children, I repeat my promise: I will pay good gifts, so the ants receive useful input, even if I am the cause of an unexpected loss.

### **An Indigenous Take on Research – and on Art and Living**

For me and my artistic practice ‘sustainable’ is one of several words, which somewhat embrace and signal the values that inform and shape how I relate and collaborate. These values actively shape decisions in both my work and private sphere. I cannot be super conscious about the content of my artwork, and my climate impact in my work and then forget this in my private life – or vice versa. It would create cognitive dissonances, as Peter Kalmus writes: “My awareness of global warming had risen to a fever pitch, but I hadn’t yet made real changes to my daily life. This disconnect made me feel panicked and disempowered.” (Kalmus 2016).

‘Sustainable’ can be one of several words to choose as it is understood by many. But at the end of the day, it is the values that count, and I must walk my talk: Acknowledging the interconnectedness and interdependency between all living entities on this planet, being aware of how we relate and of

how we can repair. What we, the privileged, often forget is the unsolved, huge problem of climate injustice amongst humans, which the work of Malcom Ferdinand (Ferdinand 2018) highlights. But will we ever find healthy balances if we do not also consider other creatures? The holistic aspect of my values becomes even more prominent as a large part of my artistic practice unfolds at my home. All the elements of work and life are connected, and healthy balances must be constantly found between private and professional spheres.

My work with Secret Hotel for two decades, and ten years with Earthwise Residency (officially named in 2020), places me and Secret Hotel as part of first movers in the realm of participatory performing art with green / more-than-human / sustainable themes<sup>7</sup>. From this vantage point I have the impression that the number of events and conferences, articles, performances, websites, and places working actively with art and sustainable values have exploded the last few years. A very healthy tendency indeed! I hope this is not a whim of fashion, but a change of mindset towards a new normal.

However, I often see a seemingly unreflecting use of the word ‘nature’. I try to avoid this as words create realities. These years western culture – or the dominant culture as Shawn Wilson suggests<sup>8</sup> – is realising that distancing humans from the rest of life on this planet is a dead end. The dichotomy nature-culture shows very clearly the unhealthy division between humans and the rest of the ecosphere: The epitome of industrialised, Christianity-based capitalist extraction culture, where all who is not a privileged human – animal, mineral or human – are seen as resources. Better late than never the dominant culture also begins to realise the core values of indigenous cultures: Care and respect for all life, and the wisdom of acknowledging interdependency and kinship, as – amongst others – also Haraway writes about (Haraway 2003).

In my ongoing search for likeminded humans, good definitions as well as relevant books for Earthwise’s library, I am thrilled to find a growing number of publications by indigenous scholars and artists. Here I look into a mirror, showing that how I think and act – rooted in animist worldview and values – is in line with indigenous peoples’ thinking and acting. Lately the Native-Canadian scholar Shawn Wilson’s (Wilson 2008) “Research Is Ceremony. Indigenous Research Methods” has inspired me. He is Opaskwayak Cree from Manitoba, living and working in Australia and describes a research paradigm which fits the ontology and ethics of indigenous peoples:

The researcher is [...] a part of his or her research and inseparable from the subject [...], and must adhere to relational accountability. Respect, reciprocity and responsibility are key features to any healthy relationship and must be included in an Indigenous methodology. (Wilson 2008, p.77)

This is parallel to the writing of indigenous Australian Tyson Yunkaporta (Yunkaporta 2020, p.246ff) who defines four elements and phases of interacting and researching: *Respect* is a prerequisite, and only then it is possible to *connect*. After this *reflection* is possible, and then *direction*, i.e., action.

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7) "Secret Hotel still has a unique position in the Danish theatre landscape, also compared to kindred / congenial theatres, as for instance Cantabile 2, Carte Balance and Wunderland, who also work with sensorial and participatory methods, by so strongly thematizing that which is outside the human, and by staging science and theoretical discourse." (Rosendal 2020, p.136).

8) "Dominant is used as an adjective to describe the culture of European-descended and Eurocentric, Christian, heterosexist, male-dominated Canada og Australia." (Wilson 2008, p. 35).





↑ People in white hazmat suits walking across a park lawn  
↓ People in white hazmat suits observing an ant in a vial, copying its movements  
Secret Hotel: Walking Lecture on Ants, 2017. Photos: Lotus Lykke Skov

## Thinking with Insects

Since 2017, I have made three participatory performances about – and with – social insects, ants and bees; *Walking Lecture on Ants*, the children version *Ants Business*, and *Banquet for Bees*.<sup>9</sup> These performances – one of them coproduced with Hungarian Pro Progressione – were created by a collective ‘we’ of concerted efforts; a hive. Biologists see beehives and anthills as superorganisms. I see the creation process of a performance – especially a co-creative one, with no manuscript until after – as a superorganism at its very best moments: The milling around parallel to each other sometimes. Being temporarily lost in creative considerations. Finally getting those seeds or pine needles carried to the same location and tying the performance elements together, so the final work emerges.

It is also a joy when hive activity emerges with the guests; the audiences: The rules and systems of the piece come into a flow, and the milling-around-with-a-purpose appears. Our guests fall into a seemingly chaotic order, as one organism. Thomas Rosendal observed as we created the ant piece; here one of several interesting perspectives on what we do:

The holism of the performance is not expressed as the idea of one mutual world, which we all must acknowledge, so we can find our true place, ants next to humans, but as an idea about the possibility to share worlds, and first of all discover – with a certain humbleness, I do believe – that humans can take part in other worlds than our own. (Rosendal 2020)



Secret Hotel: Banquet for Bees, 2020. Photo: Martin Dam Kristensen

9) *Walking Lecture on Ants* (2017) can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cklFXl0d0k4&t=2s> (accessed 18 November 2022).



The latest performance *Banquet for Bees*<sup>10</sup> – about honeybees, bumblebees, and solitary bees – ends around a 6 meters long banquet table with good opportunities for sharing conversations and reactions, as the performance is both still on and slowly ending. We describe it as a buzzing performance, where performing arts meets research. Our guests are guided to sensorial experiences, meeting nerdy bee knowledge, learning bee dances, and tasting food from the world of honeybees. Often our guests share how much fun they had, while also learning facts about bees, and how they now feel an urge to help the bees survive as a species – for the sake of the bees themselves.

I see this as a happy proof that artistic participatory experiences can contribute to understanding entangled worlds. And what is *understanding* anyway? Not a purely intellectual endeavour! There is no substitute for doing ... Haptic and sensory experience and interaction, tacit knowing and embodied reflections are central elements. We can only start to act differently in our everyday lives and political choices, if we have a holistic understanding through soul, body, mind, and heart. By encountering the world via the aesthetic, multisensorial meetings that art experiences can be, we can expand our horizons and understandings of other life forms and types of perception.

### How Big Can We-ness Be?

I was at a conference about fairness in the performing arts. Climate emergency and climate justice were only mentioned a few times, showing the core problem: That we humans – us in the dominant consumer culture – are conditioned to think, feel and act as if separated from the rest of the planet ... the only place we can actually live. Celermajer defines it:

Once you recognise that beings other than humans are also subjects of their own lives, with a 'desire' to flourish, then omitting them from the community to whom justice is owed becomes a terrible ethical breach.<sup>11</sup>

What humans *do* is their culture. All small and big decisions in human life – how we get food, meet, travel, work, live – are culture. Let us expand our idea of fairness and care and let this affect *how* we relate. Citing myself: "Everything is connected and as the West begins to recognise the interconnectedness of everything, then the 'how' we interact becomes even more vital. (Skolczylas, 2022)

Those we are connected to are many types of people. Tree people, fish people, microorganism people, bird people, etc. Each of us may feel distanced or close to them. But there is no planetary life for us humans if all the other people suffer, suffocate, drown, burn or otherwise die.

Personally, I am a pessimist. I believe the decline of societal structures as we know them – our so-called civilisations<sup>12</sup> – will be ugly and very hard to witness and survive. This does not make anyone light at heart, but please do not kill the messenger; I believe I offer some relief. Even if enormous cooperations are mostly to blame, our small actions *do* have an impact, especially what (industry meat) we (do not) eat, how we build and travel. Because our actions intertwine and breed new perspectives for future generations.

Despite being a pessimist, I have decided to try to live as an optimist. Finding out what personally gives me hope. Trying to be a good example of what is possible. And the most basic reason

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10) *Banquet for Bees*(2020) can be view at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMshZKu7QM0&t=3s> (accessed 18 November 2022).

11) Danielle Celermajer in an interview with the Faculty of Arts and Science, Sydney University.

12) 'civilization' only means 'living in cities' according to Chatwin, not being-better-than... He notes that humankind has had a nomadic lifeform much longer than sedentary and often this has less negative impact on the ecosphere (Chatwin 1996, p. 85).

for continually making efforts and being the unpopular voice in my professional communities (happily not alone any longer) is simple: I want to be able to look future generations of humans and more-than-humans in the eyes and say, hopefully dancing, that at least ... I tried!

## Buzzing frequencies

Early August 2021.

Afternoon sun in the yard of our old farm.

Around me are more buzzing sounds than I can count. A rich feeling.

A few of the bees are honeybees from our three hives, some 20 meters away. But most of the frequencies are from solitary bees. During the last two years I have expanded my knowledge on bumble and solitary bees (as well as on honeybees) and observed some 10-12 species here on the farm. But these ones are two different species of late summer, yet unknown. Listening to their wing buzz I can by now distinguish if it is a honeybee, wasp, or solitary bee/bumble bee. It is a bit like recognising friends on their walk.

Despite the tangible changes in our local climate, I am confident there will still be many buzzing sounds during the next warm season at Earthwise.

And while the busy bees and insects work, we prepare the next walking lecture performance, on the forest and its subterranean connections, the temporalities of the forest and its power of growth, while other parts of human societies still focus on other, less fertile types of growth.

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