

A Meditation Manifesto

With the hectic pace of our day to day lives, when we're so focused on meeting our individual goals and the expectations of others, it can be difficult to recognize how "we" are always so much more than ourselves. We are, inescapably, linked to those we love, to those we work with, to those we are in conflict with, and to those we take for granted. This guided meditation invites you to go deep down into those webs of connections that sustain you, that sustain me, that sustain the conference, that sustain the rooms to the left and the right, above us and beneath us where life is constantly unfolding.

Close your eyes and check in with your body. If you are sitting, rest your hands gently on your thighs. Try to distribute your weight evenly over your sit bones. Tune into your breath, wherever it is you most feel it. Maybe in your chest, or your belly, or the passage of cool or warm air just under your nose. Effortlessly allow the top of your head to rise toward the room's drop ceiling, as if you were a plant moving toward the sun. Feel the way the floating motion of your head gently opens your spine, creating a bit of space between each vertebra and allowing your lungs to fill just a little more deeply.

As you fill your lungs with air, in the company of other lungs filling with air, your out breath becomes my in breath. Your exhalation warms and moistens the air I inhale. In breathing, my lungs warm and moisten the air you will soon inhale. We exchange molecules with one another, the push and pull of our collective breathing creating eddies that mix hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen. The push and pull of our collective breathing also mixes your microbes and my microbes and our microbes with the room's microbes. Those bacteria, yeasts, viruses, and molds whose constant entrance, circulation, embrace, and exit from our bodies can make us ill but far more often makes us strong. Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out. Expand your awareness to the microorganisms that move all around us and through us, that permeate and extend our body beyond the envelope of our skin. We are here together, all beings in this room. The beings who breathe, the beings who are breathed.

As you continue to breathe this common air, expand your awareness to the breath of the room itself. Listen for the faint hum of the air exchanger as its fan sucks our exhaled breath into a vent to send outdoors. Listen for the fan, somewhere off in the distance, that sucks in air through a filter, scraping it of its microbes, its pollen, its spores. Listen as it exhales this clean-scrubbed air into this room. Tune your ears to the subtle background breath of the building as you continue to breathe.

If you found the sound of the building's breath, you may have heard the quiet humming of the building's electrical wiring, turning on and turning off as the building's systems run through their cycles. Breathe in, breathe out. That hum vibrates with the resonant frequencies of the 60 hertz power lines that carry a constant flow of moving electrons into this building to run the fans on the air exchanger, to amplify my voice, to power the projector, to turn on the lights, to operate the computers, to launder the linens, to heat the food, to warm the pool. Electricity itself is silent; we hear it only when it comes in contact with other matter. It makes matter vibrate. It makes us vibrate. It sets us alight.

If we travel with electricity away from this building, out onto campus, and back towards its source, we encounter transformers, substations, generating plants. The vibrations become louder, more intense, a throbbing hum, a crackle. The air around you buzzes with an energy almost disobedient in its force. See the charged night sky above you as you feel the intense hum in your chest. Breathe in, breathe out, in and out as your electric body-mind hums.

Eventually, we arrive at a generating station. It may be nuclear, it may be powered by natural gas. Maybe it's attached to a coal plant scheduled to shut down at the end of this year, or perhaps to the solar arrays the university has been building on rooftops as it tries to reach "carbon neutrality" by 2050.

Now, choose one of these "sources"—coal, natural gas, nuclear, solar—and find your way back to its source. The coal may come from the Appalachian Mountains, where Maryland hugs West Virginia and the hills are leveled by dynamite to claw out bituminous coal. The state's commitment to climate action means less and less coal is burned here. It's mostly sent out of the country, via the port of Baltimore, which handles a fifth of all US coal exports. Breathe in and out, in and out, as you feel your electric body-mind expand to touch miners in Appalachia, longshoremen in Baltimore, steelworkers in China, power plant laborers in central Europe.

If you chose natural gas, know that Maryland was the third state to ban fracking, so its gas now comes in from every direction via the network of pipelines that crisscross the continent. From Pennsylvania to the north, from the Gulf Coast, from the Southwest. Maryland stores billions of cubic feet of liquefied natural gas at Port Cove on Chesapeake Bay. Tracing the routes of natural gas connects your body-mind with entire Mid-Atlantic, with Trinidad, Nigeria, Norway, Venezuela, Algeria.

If you chose nuclear, you'll find yourself at the Calvert Cliffs power plant, right on Chesapeake Bay, just three miles from the Port Cove gas terminal. This plant is enormously productive, supplying over a third of the state's electric needs from two reactors built in the 1970s. The fuel comes from "yellowcake" uranium mines, probably in Canada, Kazakhstan, Australia, Russia, perhaps in the early years from the Navajo Nation, Namibia, Niger. The cancer rate for uranium miners is as much as six times that of the general population. Mining communities face higher rates of lung diseases like pneumoconiosis, tuberculosis, emphysema. The uranium they mine is processed into fuel rods that are used for three years and stored for 10,000—first in a glowing, blue-tinged 41-foot deep pool of water at the power plant, then later, indefinitely, in underground bunkers nearby. Breathe in, breathe out, in and out, feeling your lungs fill with air cleaned by electricity linked to lung disease around the globe. Allow your electric body-mind to expand to the bedside of a sick miner; to crumbly, yellow uranium ore; to a distant future perhaps unburdened by human presence, where the spent fuel rods may still quietly glow.

If you chose solar energy, perhaps you'll find yourself on the roof of a building not far from here, feeling the wind on your face, the sun on your head. Solar panels are "green" only at the point of generation. Making them requires aluminum and plastic, caustic chemicals like sodium hydroxide and hydrofluoric acid, lots and lots of water, and, of course, still more electricity. Large solar farms upend animal and bird migration routes, shade out understory plants, and remake open space for human needs. Breathe in, breathe out, in and out. Allow your body-mind

to expand to the factories where the solar panels are produced, to the mines where their aluminum is manufactured, to the “farms” where nothing is harvested but the sun.

No matter which source you chose, you really chose them all. It’s impossible to say exactly where the electricity in this room comes from anymore. The modern power grid is connected in a multitude of ways, designed flexibly to allow one generator to be turned off and another turned on without any of us consumers sensing a thing. Once you are on the grid, you can’t choose what you’re connected to—Appalachian coal fields, or Canadian uranium mines, Pennsylvania shale gas, Chinese solar factories. You can’t choose your infrastructure, any more than you can choose to breathe.

Lauren Berlant tells us, “Infrastructure is not identical to system or structure, as we currently see them, because infrastructure is defined by the movement or patterning of social form. It is the living mediation of what organizes life: the lifeworld of structure.”¹ To breathe with infrastructure as we are, to meditate on it and with it, tunes us to its eco-political life. Our eco-political life. As we move down these lines of connection, we can make sensible how these infrastructures reach across space as well as time, sustaining what Deb Cowen calls “the unequal relations of the past into the future, cementing their persistence.”²

Our lack of choice about infrastructure is a glitch in the modern, liberal, capitalist subject. It’s where the separation of you from me, and here from there, breaks down. Meditating on this breakdown and with this breakdown allows us to see through the forms of separation that kept us from making other worlds. “We can see the glitch of the present as a revelation of what had been the lived ordinary, the common infrastructure,” Berlant writes.³ In attending to the glitch, in agreeing to examine and repair the material underpinnings of everyday life, we commit to making our analyses, ideals, and visions concrete, structural, beautifully mundane.

Now, open your eyes. See the well-mannered chairs, the lectern, the projector. Remember your journey along the power lines that connect, the power lines that constrain.

Workshop Description

Sarah Kanouse's breakout group will offer participants a selection of solo and/or partnered exercises designed to tune the senses and the imagination to the built environment as an unfolding set of relations between organisms, materials, process, and labor. In modifying contemplative and performance practices to attend to both phenomenological and political-ecological dimensions of experience, the exercises ground sensory and haptic approaches in a social matrix, and vice-versa. Following the exercise, participants will discuss the degree to which their experience encouraged multi-dimensional ecological sense-making and adapt the approaches modeled to be used in a classroom or organizational environment.

1. Discussion of meditation exercise – 3 mins
 - a. inspired by Dear Climate guided meditations; frustration at some of the anti-technology, purely phenomenological deep listening work
 - b. “enlivening your immediate environment” “Befriend your own discomfort and the discomfort of complicated relationships” (Marina Zurkow)
 - c. “Re-inserting yourself into that network, which is the world of things, species, and elements” (Una Chaudhuri)
2. What did you experience during the guided meditation manifesto? – 5 minutes
3. Try other exercises – 10 minutes
 - a. Prompt 1: Walking Meditation (individual)
 - b. Prompt 2: Sound Walk (group)
 - c. Prompt 3: Blind Walking (partnered)
4. Group discussion/critique of the exercises (10 minutes)

¹ Lauren Berlant, “The commons: Infrastructures for troubling times,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 2016, Vol. 34(3) 393.

² Deb Cowen, “Infrastructures of Empire and Resistance,” Verso Blog, 25 January 2017.
<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3067-infrastructures-of-empire-and-resistance>

³ Berlant, 403