VICTORIA GRAY IN CONVERSATION WITH ERIN MANNING

KEYWORDS

world, question, feel, ecologies, sense, concepts, pragmatic, passing, valued, neurotypical, practices, environment, normative, experience, understand, called, sociality, land, people, work

Erin Manning studies in the interstices of philosophy, aesthetics and politics, concerned, always, about alter-pedagogical and alter-economic practices. Erin has written extensively about autistic perception and neurodivergence, always with a thrust towards thinking neurodivergence through process, movement and relation.

In this conversation we discuss autistic perception, neurodivergence in relation to education, academia and health, and the 3 Ecologies Institute, an exploration of the transversality of the three ecologies; the social, the environmental and the conceptual. An iteration of 3e is a land-based project north of Montreal where living and learning is explored; particularly the question of how collectivity is crafted in a more-than human encounter with worlds in the making.

Content Warning: This conversation includes discussion about mental health, mental health services, and sensory trauma.

VICTORIA GRAY: I have to resist starting with a neat question or a smooth segue into some concepts. I realized academic training doesn't really give you that opportunity. You can't really dive in without qualification or a mandate or 10,000 words. So I thought I'd do as you do, perhaps, and just dive in. And the entry point being in the middle of your most recent book 'For A Pragmatics of The Useless.' You share an account from Aspie girl, which is from their blog, 'Autism and Angels,' and Aspie girl writes:

"The TV is off, but I can still hear and feel on my skin, the current of electricity powering all that equipment."

And I was so struck by that because this is exactly my experience. This is what led me to my [autism] diagnosis. I guess I was always characterized as an overly sensitive child/adult, perhaps having extrasensory abilities . . . clairvoyant. But it was never valued. It was always seen as a weakness. I always experienced it as weakness. And it's true to say that this led to periods of burnout and fatigue in my daily life. And I guess the joyful aspects of that aren't necessarily always foregrounded. And so instead, what I have experienced is, as you've described it, a society which demonizes those bodies that collapse under the strain of overstimulation.

You introduce the concept of 'backgriddism,' as a kind of neurotypicality, which is to say, the capacity to literally background those parts of experience - like sound, like movement - that

might come ‘teeming in.’ You use that phrase ‘teeming in,’ which I really love. And that's definitely my experience. So I thought we could start with ‘teeming in’ and ‘backgridding.’

ERIN MANNING: [CRASHING SOUND] I'm smiling because my deaf cat just crashed over the whole plant behind you! So that's perfect. She's definitely not backgridding at the moment. I'm just gonna ask Brian [Massumi] to take her away.

VG: This is perfect! This is it exactly! It comes teeming in!!

EM: You know, I love your question. It's a painful question, isn't it? So I got the idea of backgridding from Brian Massumi, from his book ‘Parables for the Virtual.’ It populated my thinking for years, and then when I looked for it, it wasn't there!! I mean, versions of it were but you know, sometimes you read a book and it's doing something that is so clear to you as a powerful, powerful technique, but you've given, in a way, your own valence to it. And I think I do that quite a lot. I sort of fabulate things into thinkers because they move me in certain ways. And I think that all of Brian's work is invested in this idea of backgridding, which is this sort of secondary order practice that sort of smooths out the complexity of an event, and gives it back to us in the iteration that is valued by the world.

I often say this, and maybe I say it too often, but I'll just repeat it again. For me, neurotypicality is not a person, neurotypicality is a systemic operation that motivates a certain accounting of experience in a certain accounting of value. And when I say that, I don't mean that there is no such thing as neurotypicality, that it hasn't got real functions and real effects. Nor am I saying

that the spectrum of neurodiversity is just some kind of bland landscape where everybody fits somewhere. I mean, in a sense, that is the case. But I think we have to speak about the question of value right there. And then to talk about who passes and who doesn't, or sort of go back to the idea of backgridding. It's a question of passing. I think that for some people, the backgridding is so intuitive. It's so easy that the dwelling and the teeming doesn't even register. But the teeming is going to be there, to a degree, for everyone. But the question is, how foregrounded it is in experience. Right? And I think that like you, the irony of my own trajectory is that it didn't occur to me through all the writing that I was neurodiverse. I just kept writing and writing and writing then someday, somebody introduced me as neurodiverse. And that I like, me?!

And I think it was because I had been working with the acute case of classical autism. I was so entranced by the power of autistic perception at that acute limit. I mention this because in my case, there was quite a lot of shame around mental illness. And I want to say that because, you know, when you talked about burnout, when you talked about sort of failing the image of society, I'm assuming at some level you felt the sense that your body couldn't keep up. That’s something I've lived my whole life. But it's not something that I felt I could be open about. Because I was so busy passing. And so, you know, the time I spent in psychiatric institutions, the years I spent in therapy, trying to figure out how to mute this too intense body, those were actually in a large part time spent learning to pass. So I think when we come to backgridding, we have to recognize it is an extraordinary violence.

VG: That's exactly how I experienced it. I obviously have gone through the education system, have gone through the mental health system, and then was teaching in universities. And the question of passing, for me, was something that I'd become very adept at. But it had such a huge, huge cost. Perhaps the question, at least in the diagnostic process is . . . is it autism? is it trauma? And perhaps it is very hard to distinguish between the two. Especially if you've been passing, and dealing with the effects of that violence.

I was 36 when I had a diagnosis and felt more able to understand and maybe keep myself safe. I think it's probably the way that I would explain it best. You mentioned about muting the too intense body. This is something that I was never really able to do, except on the surface. And so the effects were always there, it was never something that I was truly able to switch off. And, interestingly, I support lots of people who are going through the diagnostic process. And a lot of the time, especially for people who are perhaps older, they'll say, “but what happens if I mask so much in the assessment?” They don't necessarily have a sense of being able to not pass, or know when are they passing.

I’ve obviously read your work [on autism] over the years, and I’d often feel, like you, that this wasn’t me. But when I got my diagnosis, I just sort of looked at my bookshelf and thought how all of the artwork that I had been making - I mean, essentially, I look back on all of the performances and the drive to you know, study dance professionally - it kind of was like a form of stimming. Or it was a place that I could justify my need to be physical, to have repetitive movement. I was able to call it art or whatever. But it had another function, for me.

EM: I think, one of the key concepts for me in ‘For a Pragmatics of the Useless’ is ‘minor sociality.’ And it's deeply inflected by the work in black studies around sociality, which I understand is a foregrounding of the field of relation. In a way that is so familiar to me from the way that autistics speak about how the world resonates in excess of a body envelope. And I think that that's the place where there's often an extraordinary shame for neurodiversity. Because normative sociality, that begins and ends with subject positions, is so hard. And we live in a world where that is prized in the name of neurotypicality. In the name of whiteness. And that's what the universities breed. Whiteness. Neurotypicality.

And so when we fail at that, what we internalize is self-hatred. And the failure at that happens through this extraordinary labor of passing. Trying and trying through a whole lifetime to figure out what the constellation of one-plus-one sociality can feel like, in order to do it. And the minor sociality - which is the being in the world and movement, the feel of the relational field, the activation through an ecology of practices - that has so little value. Or is given so little value. It's given some sort of peripheral value in all kinds of academic fields. But you're supposed to accompany that with a kind of major sociality. And so when we think about backgridding, it's important to also think about the ways in which that which produces a certain kind of failed body, is perpetuated through the way we understand ourselves as partners, as parents, as children, etc. And if we get to the place where we recognize the value of minor sociality, it will affect, I think, the conditions in which we live in the sense that we may have to make decisions about things we don't want to do anymore. I know I have, just in terms of the kinds of engagements or encounters that are simply not possible.

The example I would give is that, you know, almost 20 years ago, I decided I just couldn't go to conferences, I felt like such a failure. But I would go to conferences, and I would be so miserable, so miserable, so alone, so confused about how to perform. And I had the luck to be in an environment academically where I was invited enough that I didn't have to go to conferences. I mean, I was invited to do things enough that that would be representative of my service to the academy. But had I not received all those invitations, I would have failed in the process of being recognized as an academic because I couldn't do that kind of work. And I had no idea that not doing that kind of work had a reasoning.

VG: Yeah, I was 10 years in the academy, three years teaching in a college, and seven years at a university. And that sense of failure and shame and guilt is exactly my experience, and going to conferences, exactly. Spending most of the time in the toilet because then I wouldn't have to do the major sociality. And feeling that I couldn't quite understand what it was. It's a very mercurial experience. Like, I'm good at this, intellectually I can perform, I can mask for a certain amount of time. And yet, this makes no sense to me in another sense. And that not only produced a sense of guilt and shame, but a real disconnect, to the point where I actually resigned my job. And I think the resignation was not even so much to do with burnout. But it was to do with this sense of unease with the performance that I was having to do, which I couldn't quite understand. Really, what am I doing in order to pass in this environment? And I don't think the guilt and shame actually goes away. I think it's actually sometimes made worse by the fact that my way of being in the world has a diagnostic set of criteria. And that means that in certain situations, I need to disclose that difference in order to feel valued. And that is in professional and also personal situations.

And of course, the word autism being so loaded with stereotypes, you know, and the confusion around, well, you know, “how can you be autistic because X, Y, Z”, or whatever. I think that certainly has been my experience. Which is why reading your work and delving into concepts has been so productive because it made sense. It made the other sense that I've been looking for.

There's two concepts that you bring up in ‘For a Pragmatics of the Useless,’ William James with ‘voluminousness’ and Alfred North Whiteheads term, ‘extensive continuum.’ The ‘extensive continuum,’ you describe as “experience as yet unparsed, the intensity, the expressivity of a world in motion.” And with ‘voluminousness,’ “intensive magnitude, not quantity.” These concepts are really good examples of moments in my engagement with philosophy - which I never studied, and came to quite late – where as soon as I started to read, it was like, “YES, OF COURSE!”. And, not to say that I could have written it myself, but it was almost like, “oh, that's how I would say it if I could say it.” It felt like that. It was a real affirmation. So when I read ‘intensive magnitude’ I fabulate. Because I don't precisely understand the concept. And I'm not so worried about that anymore, coming out of academia. But it makes me feel when I enter a space or leave a space, what I am left with is tone, energy, shape, color, line, atmosphere. Not persons, table, chairs, emotions. I really can forget what people have said, and people's names. But I can come away with a drawing or a diagram. Or I can move somehow in the shape of what the encounter felt like. But that's a problem, and has been a problem, because that other language is not valued. And I find that all the time with students who think, perhaps more visually, that this translation is something that we're always

working on. And it can sound vague if you come away from something and say, “well, it felt like this.” But actually, for me, the feeling is much more precise than that. It sounds vague, but it's actually really precise. It kind of burrows into me. And it pierces in a very targeted way. So it's not general at all. And then, I guess from that burrowing, it kind of opens out this universe of sort of simultaneous amorphous connections. Which is I guess what I feel when I read ‘extensive continuum.’ It's also what I feel when I dance or do somatic work. I grasp the concepts in that way. Already I'm starting to think visually. And I'm having to move my arms around a lot in order to talk about it. That says so much about how I get the concept. How I *get it.*

EM: You know, you've just given such a beautiful description of process philosophy. Those three or four sentences have encapsulated Whiteheadean thought. I think that philosophy is actually extraordinarily intuitive. So what the university does is it organizes our thinking into secondary thinking. It organizes our thinking into exegetical thinking, rather than foregrounding thought as a platform for relation. And so when I say, as I have, that children are the best and the first philosophers, I'm not being trite or quick. The reason I say that is that children understand the pragmatic operations as the proper operations of existence. Which is to say, they understand which questions are worth asking, and they ask those questions directly. But those pragmatic operations - like death, for example - are also speculative. And children don't make this separation, you know. Small children, preschool children, don't make this fundamental separation between the speculative and the pragmatic. When they ask you what is death, which almost all children do at some point, they ask you a real question. And the real

question is linked both to their relationship to it, so, “how does death affect me?”, and how death as a concept mobilizes existence. These are like the two key philosophical questions.

So when you spoke just now, what was beautiful about the way you encapsulated it is that it turned us back to the question of “feeling” which is in Whitehead. So Whitehead called this philosophy a Critique of Pure Feeling, as opposed to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason. And what Whitehead is trying to do is separate feeling, as you did so beautifully, from a subject driven account. Which is to say he wants us to understand that the world is moved, and in its moving, it has affective effects. So with Whitehead, what we do is we study how that movement does its work. So when you gave the example of entering a room, I think what's happening in the encounter with the world in movement is that there's a direct experience of the complexity of inter-crossings. So what you're directly feeling, I think, is how everything is collaborating to produce the space that you've entered into and that is entering into you. I think that one of the main reasons why this isn't valued, is that it releases complexity, rather than performing a simplicity. And when that happens, you're also directly experiencing paradoxical effects of that complexity. What happens is that the field of attention is mobilized in that complexity, rather than easily parsing the foreground; which might be a lecture, or, which might be a Christmas party, or whatever it is.

So what you're supposed to have done in that room is parse. That's that simple account. You're supposed to remember what the lecturer said, or you're supposed to, you know, remember someone's name, or you're supposed to, whatever it is that you're supposed to do. And I think that that passing is so exhausting, because you're doing both at once. So you're

actively working to mute the complexity in order to produce a body that stills, in a way. That makes the folks around you feel like you're performing in their foregrounding of the event. The horror of it is that now, you know, having thought about this, I assume that probably about half the people in that room are miserable. So it's like you're doing this with other people who are also doing it.

Pedagogically what I've tried to do over the years is to try to demystify it from the beginning. For example in a classroom, it's likely that about 5% of what is said from my mouth is registering. So that's okay, let's be okay with 5%. Don't worry, I'll repeat myself. This is not the only locus of action in this room. But, you know, then we have to start valuing the other areas in the environment which are doing their work. And I think that the main impediment is time. It simply is another temporal proposition to feel, and feel that environment. And it can't be bracketed according to the normative brackets that generally give us our account of value. So it may not be doable in, for example, the 12 or 13 class-arc of a typical course in a university, or whatever. Does that make sense?

VG: Yeah, it absolutely makes sense. Obviously, having been in universities, and having been on the side of both student and lecturer, and now supporting autistic students, that's exactly the experience. I've said before to colleagues, I feel that what I'm doing is supporting the student to be able to sit in both of those positions, and to facilitate the work of translation. But also at the same time to validate and say, “Yes, this makes no sense. It's a game and we have to learn how to play this game together.” For example, as you said, when you don't take in the

verbal information, that's fine. Let's find other ways and let's privilege the things that maybe you are taking away from it.

For myself, in the world, I think one of the things that seems valued is the ability to be able to close myself off, even temporarily, from the welter of experience, or the teeming. And that's not something that I can do very well without great cost. And what I've found is that the less time I've spent in academic spaces, and the less time I've spent performing that work, the more comfortable I am kind of delving into something like this [interview] without having done massive amounts of preparation. Whereas before, I would have needed all of the tools and all of the barriers, if you like, in order to perform perfectly well. Which is to perform language, to perform the right words in the right order, and to have it make absolute linguistic sense. I feel that now I can be with the feeling more, which was always there before, but I was never allowed to stay in that. I was always in this kind of middle point between having to be “Victoria,” the person in control, standing there speaking at a lectern, and then coming home and collapsing, and being able to process all of that. I feel much more comfortable now, and my existence is like a hybrid of something, which is much more comfortable.

EM: I'm so glad that you found that. I think it's also rare, you know. There are so few forms of existence that are remunerated that can foster a body that isn't in fight or flight all the time. What you said earlier about the relationship between trauma and neurodiversity, I think they simply can't be fully detached one from the other. Because to be born into the valuing of neurotypicality is to be born into the devaluing of other forms of existence. But there are other

forms of existence that aren't necessarily visible. It's a particular problem. The question of how to manage something that is not palpable to most of the people who are in an environment with you.

VG: Yeah, that it's not palpable to other people. For example, I might not want to work in a particular room, because for me the room “feels.” Feels wrong. And I have a really strong sense that that's very precise. It's not wishy washy kind of vagueness. I'm really clear about that in my language, in this language, in this other way of knowing. But then I always have to translate that into something which often leads to, I guess, lying. Because you're having to sort of make it make sense. And that can also produce a certain amount of guilt and shame. Because these are our strategies. If you need to explain that to somebody, I can't say it how I mean it.

EM: One of the biggest areas of shame for me as a student, when I was studying philosophy in Berlin, was that I couldn't work in a library. I've never been able to spend more than 30 seconds in a library. There may be libraries in the world that I could spend time in but it's partly the lighting. It's partly the grid of typical library environments where you have modules for study that organize your body within them. But none of this was very clear to me. All that was clear to me was shame. And messiness. How could I be an intellectual if I can't be in a library? Or, why is it that I can only do my work in a café? After a while, you know, years and years and years, I began to understand that the silence of a library allowed for too much noise for me. I needed another kind of noise in order to do my work. But I know other neurodiverse folks who can't possibly work in a café because they're so audio sensitive that that would be an impossibility.

And so I think that part of the problem is that we can't ever say that it's all this way or all that way. And so you're always in the exception. The only kind of truth is that there is a lot of sensation. But how that maps out is just going to be different for everybody. But I'm exactly as you say, I will reorganize every room that I'm in, be it a hotel room, you know, I feel like I need to. It's the first thing that I'll do to get the thing to sit right.

VG: Earlier I mentioned that my work has been in education and in art. At the minute I've been working more in health contexts. The impulse has come from a thrust to develop more peer-to-peer mentoring for autistic adults who've gone through the diagnostic process. So usually in the UK, what happens is you have your diagnosis, and then you have a post-diagnostic program. They call it psychoeducation, which I find really difficult. It's a multidisciplinary team normally made up of clinicians and occupational therapists. I work as an expert by experience, and am trying to infuse that with an alternative, which might be to have another autistic person or neurodivergent person to spend time with. And have that be the support rather than the more clinical or medical model.

And so I'm kind of in a bind, because our services - whilst I think they're trying to do good work - I've noticed in terms of the sensory that occupational therapy and sensory integration practices are coming through strongly. It's definitely figuring really strongly in a lot of the programs that I see here in health. And you know, my background is in dance so I'm not against foregrounding the senses. But what I do feel - and obviously, to be clear, I think that it is well intended - is when we talk about "integration," we risk imposing a particular organization

of the senses. As if a neurodiverse way of sensing is so disintegrated or disorganized, as opposed to just differently integrated.

So I wondered, what kinds of ways could we support in a more ethical way? Ways which are not oriented by coordinates that are centralized on a neurotypical system of sensory organs? Where everything is in its right place. Because for me, I can't make my senses sit still and not merge. I have strong synesthetic experience and sound for me can feel like touch. [Before my diagnosis] I always attributed that to art, because I was always in an art context. But actually, it came first. I think I called it art to pass and to have it be valued, because I couldn't have it be valued elsewhere. So I worry that certain practices like this teach us to pretend that we can parse the senses, and pretend that we have agency over what moves us. And that might just be another form of masking and passing at great cost. I suppose that's a certain personal question that I have, but it definitely relates to a lot of the reading that I've done over the years with your work. Maybe also thinking with ‘body without organs.’

EM: I think it's really key to recognize that the force of narrative vocality - understood also as whiteness, in the sense of a systemic operation to normalize a certain mode of bodying in the world - is going to be in all our practices. And we have to recognize that. That's why I've done so much work in ‘For a Pragmatics of the Useless’ in the context of black studies, to try to move that vocabulary into an account of race. That is, a particular kind of account of race that doesn't reorganize itself on the body of the individual, as its main major matrix. And the reason is that, I think exactly as you've said, we have to understand that the work of the therapist in most normative clinical settings - including the best ones, because I think occupational therapy

has been shown to be extraordinarily valuable for folks with sensory issues - is exactly as you're saying, it is still a deficit model. And so in being a deficit model the presupposition is that you're learning to pass.

I think that one of the things I haven't written much about, but that I think about all the time, is that limit case of getting stuck, which is very familiar to people with classical autism, where the body literally sticks, it jams. So you come to a site of what I would think of as ‘absolute movement,’ which is to say that the body is moving so fast that it now can't displace itself. Or at least, if there's any kind of displacement, it can't displace itself in a way that can orient toward a multitude of movements. It organizes itself into a limited array of movement, if it moves at all, in a sense of displacement. And that spectrum of stuckness is in all of us. You know, we were speaking before about the relationship of neurodiversity and trauma. I think a lot of the time it expresses itself as depression, or angling into depression. I suffered from chronic depression, and I medicated for it, but even then the medication doesn't control that angling into a certain kind of absolute movement. It never feels to me like stopping. It feels to me like vibrating at the wrong speed, is the easiest way I would describe it. And so what you're saying about the danger of sensory integration is that it adds a certain amount of shame to the body that is already in an overload of sense. I think the problem is that there can't be a therapeutic operation that can generally work. The therapeutic operation has to be singularly engaged and engaging. The closest I find to that is schizoanalysis. And that's why in ‘For a Pragmatics of the Useless’ I talk so much about schizoanalysis, because schizoanalysis begins with the premise that the activity is born of the encounter. So how you address whatever it is you're addressing,

is born of that encounter. And what that means is that you have to give up a certain idea of a normative baseline.

The idea of the schizoanalytic encounter is not to make the so called “patient” fit. It's to increase the force of life. And increasing the force of life may not look like fitting in to the world as we live it. And that's always going to be the challenge, I think. Or at least, it's always been the challenge as I've experienced it. This kind of double pact where on the one hand you're figuring, out over time, practices that allow for living to be possible and to thrive in that context. And on the other hand, you're learning how to make do with an environment that is deeply counter, in a lot of cases, to those forms of life. And then if you want to complicate that a little bit, which I'm trying to do in my work, you recognize that, yeah, you and I have this experience, but we carry whiteness with us in other ways. And so how you and I normatively connect to the status quo is going to be radically different from somebody who is going to be separated out for their racial difference. They’re gonna have another degree of complexity to engage in. I think that that's the challenge. That organization isn't possible in that sense of organizing a body. That a pragmatic operation is going to be necessary, which simply takes time.

VG: You mentioned just before the stuckness. You said of your experience of depression, that it was like vibrating at the wrong speed. And that made me think about when I had my, I guess it would be called a clinical breakdown. It was actually diagnosed in many different ways, but one of the things that it was diagnosed as was “aggravated depression” or “agitated depression,” which I thought was really interesting as there’s a paradox between the two. There's the sense of the depression as the “stuckness,” and the agitated / aggravated as this

kind of vibrating. Really alive. And I did explain that at the time. I said, I don't actually feel depressed. I'm not outwardly mobile, but inside, I feel completely alive. And this is the difficulty, I guess, in terms of the language or the languaging of those kinds of experiences. This is also the paradox of working in mental health services. Yes, I have good intentions going into this. But I also carry, as you said, whiteness with me in in other ways. I suppose it's just being aware of that, isn't it? At all points.

EM: Yeah. And to really practice living in the complexity. It's not a zero sum game. So the neurotypicality that is systemic is organizing all of us into a narrative that privileges certain ways of bodying. I don't know how to say it. I mean that the world as it's given to us is going to facilitate passing for some of us more so than for others. So you and I, as white skinned people, middle class - I mean, middle class in the sense of having entered into a class that is valued - where we're going to be able to have access to those medical institutions which we can benefit from. Now, I say that really carefully. Because I know as soon as I say that, that there is no medical environment that is particularly good for neurodiversity, except maybe schizoanalysis. It's not medical. I mean, there's no psychiatric operation in the medical system that I know of that can truly assist neurodiversity. Because the mental health environment is also premised under typicality. So all of the time that I spent in it was about turning me into a passing person, right? I mean, that's the point of it.

VG: That sounds like a really good point to talk a bit about the 3 Ecologies Institute, because it seems like a lot of the things that we're talking about in terms of institutions, in health, or in

education, are things that you are questioning, experimenting with and challenging in 3e. I'll just read a very brief description from the website:

“3 Ecologies places a special emphasis on creating a welcoming environment for neurodiversity. Not only supportive of it but positively learning from the normally undervalued, experiential, and perceptual worlds of pathologized and racialized communities.”

The description is wonderful, but I feel it's more that it is neurodiverse at its core. Rather than it be a welcoming environment *for* neurodiversity. It seems more organic than that.

EM: It's great that you noticed that and I've since shifted the vocabulary from 3 Ecologies Institute to 3 Ecologies Project. I think in large part because “institute” still has the feeling that you're welcoming someone else, and you've figured out how to welcome them. Yeah. I think that actually 3e is an enormous puzzle. And it's proven to be extraordinarily challenging.

So we purchased land in the beginning of the year. It's a large tract of land north of Montreal that is off grid. Brian and I never considered 3e as a place. It's a proposition that is in the world. So the transversality of the 3e is what is activating our imagination. But we wouldn't in any sense suggest that what we're doing is “it.” It's just an angle on it. And it's proven to be a very complex angle on it for all kinds of reasons. One of them being that to imagine how to live in the north of Quebec, off grid, is in itself a complex proposition. So the site has three habitations, three houses, and a maple shack. It's all solar, in a climate that has six months of winter, and very short days for at least three of those months. So what we found is that the

environment will require of us that all of us who participate there learn how to live differently than we do.

And some of the practices feel quite neurotypical, if I'm honest with you. I think over time I'll learn to talk about it differently, but in the sense that there are deeply pragmatic operations that need to be attended to. You can't just turn on a light. And so you have to have an understanding of the relationship between the solar panel, the day, the sun, and so on. And because that's not a mode of functioning that most of us are familiar with, it requires a certain amount of change of behavior. And a body that is already deeply fatigued by the world in which it lives may not have the energy left to shift behavior in that way. But the land is uncompromising. Another issue is the way that solar works. You have solar panels that feed battery systems, and the battery systems continue to give you the energy over a period where the sun isn't there. And that understanding of how the batteries are operating happens through visual means. So they're LED screens or websites that require a certain kind of mode of perception. I collaborate with deafblind folks who would have no access to this visual, but also, your neurodiversity may make it challenging to integrate that mode of functioning. Now, my friend, John Lee Clark, who's deafblind, has said to me that we should probably think about all of the existing technologies in which we live as also unintuitive. They're just more known to us. So it's not that most of us understand electricity, or it's not that most of us understand, you know, plumbing or whatever. Also, the houses have no other heating. What are the conditions that facilitate building a fire, and so on . . .

So a lot of the thinking has been about a kind of collective recognition that not every aspect has to be shared by everyone. But an ethos does have to be shared. Because there's a vulnerability or a fragility in the environment that makes it such that if you can't recognize and adhere to the conditions of its mode of functioning, it won't function. And so that's a puzzle. And we've really struggled with it and I think maybe now what I would say is that 3e will be that puzzle. And maybe that's how the learning and living will happen. Now, of course, the learning and living is very much committed to learning more about that ecology which we call the environment and how it performs. And, how we collaborate with it through permaculture and other means, such as making maple syrup. So where my heart is, is in developing practices that are neurodiverse at their core, that integrate those pragmatic issues without normalizing a kind of neurotypical take on them.

But I can tell you, it's been incredibly hard. Because what the learning curve does is it puts you in anxiety. And we all know that when our bodies go into anxiety, they revert quite quickly to a normative frame. And so it's difficult, I think as people enter into the project. At its core, it’s a project to deeply rethink property by giving the land away to the public. So the idea is for Brian and I to pay off the debt, and then to give the land back to the public. So it's taken out of private property. This kind of work is simply a lifetime's work. And it has to grow collectively. And it's questions have to be addressed collectively. And the pain of its challenge has to be shared by those who are interested in sharing that angle and existence.

VG: And I guess part of the pain is money. Money has to come into at some point. How does that work?

EM: I think that in all the work that Brian and I have done around alter economies, I'm always aware of how the one place where the normative comes back fastest is around the question of money. There's just so much shame around the question of money. And particularly in terms of precarity. So this is a proposition where the purchase of the land was done by Brian and I, and the payment of the debt will be done by Brian and I. But what's difficult is that we're noticing there is an uneasiness. I don't mean negativity, I mean, an uneasiness in the true sense of a challenging grasping of what it might mean to contribute to a project that carries this duplicity. Where on the one hand, it is private property at the moment, and that any work that happens there is, in the capitalist sense, enhancing our investment. But it's not an investment, because we're giving it back to the public, right. So it's messy as hell at this point, you know. And, we're flailing a little bit. But we're also learning so much, you know. So I don't know. Maybe that's what it is to truly experiment?

VG: As you said, it's more a proposition or a question than an answer. And so in that sense, that ethos, and an agreement on that, is perhaps all you can do. Because I also know that just being in a room of neurodiverse people at the autism service is very interesting. One person's need might actually cancel out the ability to provide that need for somebody else. So somebody was too warm, and so we needed the window open. But because the window was open we could hear the traffic, so we closed the window. Then put on a fan, but the movement of the fan was difficult for somebody else. And in the end, thankfully, we could all laugh about it. That's a very acute example, but it is almost like that. You know those games where you move one square, but it kind of pushes something else out of joint. And I think there's never

going to be the perfect solution where all the pieces are in the right place. And nor should it be really, because where then is the living, if you like? And it feels at least a conscious move away from the institutions that we're talking about. Perhaps particularly in education, but also in health. I mean, thinking about schizoanalysis and some of the other things that I know that you've written about, it doesn't need to separate education from health or wellbeing. Because actually, it's precisely by making those distinctions that we end up in the situation of passing.

EM: You know, just to segue back to art and to durational practices and the land. One of the mistakes and one of the misunderstandings would be that we would think that 3e was required land. And of course, we don't think that, not for a second. 3e is everywhere. It's in your apartment, it's on your balcony, it's on the street. It's wherever you are all the time. The transversality of the social, the environmental and the conceptual overlap. And our question for these times is how to keep them in overlap. And I think what the land does is it just foregrounds certain aspects. And for us, the aspect of the living environment was one that we felt we needed to focus in on. Because we had spent a lot of time thinking about the conceptual and the social, you know. So doing that means that you're learning in the doing, in ways that are very artistic, I mean, they're very aesthetic. You're collaborating with the environment and your public is the environment, right. I feel very strongly that this is, for a lot of people, an exciting way to learn and make. It certainly is for me. It’s extraordinary to be able to practice in an environment that gives me both the durational, repetitive practice that I yearn for, and the surprise of how it receives it, and how I learned from it. And so definitely, I see it as a living-learning environment for those who are interested in that angle and experience.

VG: There's two things just before we finish. You mentioned in this context that the environment becomes the audience. I've been writing a new grant application form, and one of the questions that it asks is, “who will benefit?” And, “how many participants, “how many audience members.” But they presume a human participant. So what you're proposing is something completely different. It takes out that question of how many “human” participants will benefit from this. And also, in the timeframe of a project, you're talking about something which you can't possibly anticipate, because of, as you said, the overlap, which I really like.

Actually, “overlap” was in a quote that I had picked out [from ‘For a Pragmatics of the Useless’]. And it came from, I think, extensive continuum. Maybe it's a nice way to finish, because I wanted to finish by talking about Autistic Joy. Or just getting an impression of what that might mean and how that might resonate for you. So in the book I think you're unpacking extensive continuum and you say:

“the actualizing into voluminous expression is an occurrence always in overlap, a million shapings producing a million expressions, facilitating an infinity of volumes, morphing at each turn of the world making itself.”

And that's what I felt when I was explaining what it feels like to be in a room. It's this overlap, producing an infinity of volumes, morphing. Exactly. So when you described 3e and you mentioned overlap, I was brought back to this. I thought, well, this is it in practice. This is the question.

EM: It's so beautiful, what you say, and I wish I could take you there. But one of the things that we did immediately, was that we started setting up these little adjacent sitting areas. We call them cocoons. They have a kind of cocoon like feeling. And Brian and I would joke that we were so busy with all the work we had to do, because it is an incredible amount of work, just, you know, moving wood, I mean, it feels like every day you're moving wood from one place to another, or, you know, planting or whatever you're doing or fixing something or figuring out how generators work or whatever it is that you're doing. And I said to him, you know, do you think it's crazy that we've made all these cocoons that we never sit in?

But there is a sense in both of us that the world needs as many of these adjacent sites as possible. And one of them that we built, we called the fort, was a kind of netted tent in the forest, which I think we sat in twice over the summer. And it was magical to sit in it because you were really in the middle of the forest. There are lots of black flies in the spring, so that's why it needs to be netted. And, anyway, so I went last week to prepare for winter. And I took it down. And when I took it down, there was a salamander in it. And this is a gorgeous little space, carpeted and chairs. It's very pretty, because I love pretty things. And these kind of salamanders very rare. It doesn't exist anywhere else in Canada. It shouldn't actually be this far north. But it really did feel like we built this fort for this salamander, you know. And no art application in the world would understand the beauty of having built space with furniture that cost hundreds of dollars for this tiny little salamander. But I do think that what that salamander does is it mirrors back the world in an adjacency. It’s this adjacency, this kind of angularity that I'm always interested in, that gives the world back to us on an angle that reshapes it to some degree.

The question for me of Autistic Joy is key. I mean, it's a beautiful place to finish. Because the issue is always, “how do you make life?” For me always, every day, there isn't a day where I take living for granted. And I think that that's true of a lot of people. Maybe all people who are neurodiverse feel that the world isn't made for us. And so we have to make a world every single day. And this making of the world is done in ways that are often a real struggle. But every once in a while - and I don't mean every once in a while, in the sense of once every three months, I mean every 37 seconds or whatever - every once in a while in a temporal field, it's exuberance stands out. And this exuberance is with us. And so as we get our diagnoses of whatever it is, we're diagnosed with the presupposition. Like say I'm diagnosed with depression. The presupposition is that I'm sad. I mean, I might be sad, but this sad is the wrong word for it. I'm intensified in ways that are complicated to live with, you know. So this joy has nothing to do with happiness. It's an aliveness that is interspersed with the extraordinarily difficult question of how to live in this world. And I think if anything for me at the moment, 3e is a proposition to amplify that joy, by creating conditions for a field of relation that is invested in minor sociality. Which is to say, it's a communal site that isn't premised on the human. That invites the human but not the bad habits of the neurotypical as much as possible.

VG: And then the usefulness and use value comes into that, because you mentioned the cocoons, and, you know, “it's criminal, that we're not using them!”. But then, somebody or some*thing*, actually, more to the point *is*. And that's the point.

Just to finish on something that brought me autistic joy. I saw a really wonderful performance years ago by a friend called Kiki Taira, a Japanese artist. And in the beginning of the performance, she had a carrier bag, and we didn't know what was inside of it. And she gave it to somebody in the audience. We were all waiting for what she would do with it . . . “what is it, what you going to do with it, what's its use?” . . . and then the performance finished. She took the carrier bag and we had no clue. I felt joy because it was just allowed to exist. We don't need to know why it's there, or what it's for. And I think that's what I'm getting from you when you talked about the cocoon. I think, it's fine for it to exist.

Thank you so much. It’s been really wonderful to bring some of the question marks off the page and bring them to you. To have a conversation which I didn't have to prepare for or do my homework for!

EM: I was so happy that I didn't have to prepare for you. I didn't have to prepare a kind of intelligent way of giving myself to the world.

VG: Yeah, I've done the PhD, I don't want to do it again. It wasn't worth it!!

EM: Exactly, exactly. Thanks, Victoria.

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https://3ecologies.org/

http://erinmovement.com/about-senselab

http://www.inflexions.org/

https://www.dukeupress.edu/for-a-pragmatics-of-the-useless

https://punctumbooks.com/imprints/3ecologies-books/

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