

How to empathize with a place

Intro and Intention

We're used to empathize with individuals. What happens if we take a step back from this unique manifestation of traits and mechanisms in a body, but to see all of this as a product of bigger structures? How can I really listen to this expression of a society? How does this perspective change the focus of what you tend to?

If these structures produce pain, what really gets to the cause? How then to listen, without already knowing the answer to the question? How can we drop our agenda and still be connected to what matters most to us? And most of all: how to use this to enter into a shared experience rather than feeling separated? The following is essentially an exercise in observing own observations and how we constantly populate our surroundings with meaning. When we start to be aware how the world is structured by our perception, perception changes.

Exercise

We constantly move through places and spaces, condensed structures of our societies, ecosystems, a constant flow of movement and exchange.

I want to invite you, to stop your movement for a while.

I want to invite you, to fully immerse in a place and encounter it with curiosity and empathy.

First select the place.

Open your senses.

Which place attracts you?

Follow your intuition.

If possible, spend about 15 Minutes there.
If possible go there more than once.
Bring pen and paper.

I will ask you to pause the track when it helps the exercise, but of course you can take a break, whenever it suits you. You can even split it up in chunks, that feel comfortable to you.

I will first guide you through your senses, before asking a few suggestive questions about relationships, feelings and needs.
Writing will help you to observe yourself. You can either do it whenever you see fit or you can wait until you've heard everything. I recommend to wait at least until you've gone through the senses.

Instruction

*Now you can pause the track and move into your space.
When you are on site and ready, continue.*

On site

Settle in. Welcome.

Tune into your senses. Start with closing your eyes. Breathe. Feel gravity. The contact to the ground. Your feet. Your buttocks. Your back. Your hands.

Selfconnection

What is alive in you right now? What did you bring with you? Are there expectations? Intentions?
Welcome them.
Invite whatever arises to be part of this experience.

Smell

Now shift your attention to smell. What do you smell or taste? Can you differentiate certain smells? Take a few deep breaths to take it in.

Hearing

Now shift your attention to your hearing. Be aware of your judgements.
Try to differentiate as many sounds as you can.
Try to spread your attention to the horizon.
Try to hear as much as possible

Instruction

*Pause the track.
Keep your eyes closed.
Take off your headphones for a while to expand.*

Seeing

Now open your eyes. What do you see? What landscape unfolds before your eyes?
Are there Buildings? Structures? Beings? Movements?

Relationship

Who do you encounter? Humans, animals, plants, fungi, supernatural invisible beings, ghosts, spirits, ideas, stories?

What more-than-human community gathers here?
What do they need?
What language do they speak?
What gentle ways do you have to understand their needs?

Feelings

What happens, if you allow yourself to be touched, by what you see?
How does this place evoke feelings within you?
What feelings?

What kind of hope arises out of these feelings?
Are there any wishes you're having for this place?

Needs

How does this place evoke needs?
What resonates with you?
What is being advertised?
Movement? Nurture? Peace of mind?

With whom would you have to negotiate meeting your needs?
What about the bee sitting on the dandelion, that you want to pluck and put on your salad?
What about transforming your street into a garden?

Perspective is fluid.

Imagine this place to be a common place, normal, mundane and not special at all.

Imagine this place to be the last of its kind, every specimen unique, every relation fragile.

How does your perception change?

It is so easy to cast romanticized or apocalyptic visions out in the world.

What gives you hope?

Instruction

Pause the track to write.

Continue when you're ready to finish the exercise.

Outro

Close your eyes again.
Be aware of the fluidity of your perception and the stories at work within it.
Return to your body sitting. Standing. Lying.
Breathe.
Surrender.
Let go.
Let everything go.

Where are you now?

Example

It is Saturday, February 25th 14:26. Just as I write, the sun peaks through the clouds the first time today. I'm sitting in a café close to the main station Basel. People read. People behind screens small and big. The barista foaming milk, being a calm and gentle presence in the room. Occasional laughter. Someone sneezing. The tram passing outside.

I observe myself looking for the sweet spot between a receptive presence for observation and the danger to become distracted. Interesting conversations nearby attract me. I try to return to the questions at hand. Who gathers here? What community is present? I have different perspectives to approach. Everyone is white. No, two POCs just entered the room. The barista has Asian features. Suddenly I'm racist. Probably was all along. Do I need empathy for this?

Everyone is able to participate in such a sociality. Has the knowledge and the habitus to move in such a place and most of all the financial capital to consume here. What place is it, where students can stay and disappear behind their screens? What needs do they pursue here? Connection, sociality, belonging. Also quenching thirst and hunger. Also a need for collaboration, maybe focus, maybe the visit here serves the purpose of narrowing the means for distraction. All my projections. What do I know? Why am I here? To follow such a strategy.

I see plants and am amazed by their size. I imagine them being either old or well cared for. Or both. I can't write all the things that I'm observing and am a bit overwhelmed. I sense a tiredness in my body. This landscape can be very lonely.

The presence of others prevents myself slacking. A form of social control delegated to those around me unknowingly. Maybe not very fair, but then again, they don't have to do anything. I sense a certain doubt or a fear rising, that this exercise might be banal or superficial. I want to offer an experience. I'm afraid it might be too focussed on observation, that it might be too reflexive and too little connecting to other beings. That a landscape is always too abstract. A place always something one-sided, something you can relate to, inscribe yourself in, but only from your point of view. The place itself will never return to you, except for an echo. The people will maybe. If you tend well to the place, it will survive. Maybe. Then again you carry the place within you.

It's memory. A language. A way to move in a terrain. You can read the signs, blend in, survive.

What does it mean to belong? A place where I can relax, where I know, I'm being cared for, where I can meet my needs. I will be heard. I will be seen. I'm allowed and able to exist. Eventually everything breaks down to this. All the beings surrounding me, chatting, reading, working will find themselves among these needs.

Yet I feel another judgement rising, that I actually have no clue about what might be important to them and suddenly this feels like a very nihilist practice. I can never know anything. I always have to inquire. Ask. Who are you? What do you need? What touches you in your innermost? How can I relate to you?