on sharing relational practices / human exceptionalism / learning to be affected by the non-human world / de-centralizing the role of humans / activist approach / change as a side effect / plants as collaborators / conspiring with plants / attention economy and unproductivity / practices of un-listening / ecological belonging / artist as outsider / hospitality / bringing art into politics / keeping cutting and replanting trees

with **Joss Allen**
17 june 2021 [*r,1,h*]

MZ: OK, I started the recording. Now we are on air.

JA: Great!

MZ: All right. Can we shortly start with you? I don't know you so much. I was checking the website of 'Deveron Projects' and I found it very cool what this association is doing. I can relate pretty much to this 'think locally', and the concept of ARTocracy. But please, if you want to take a couple of minutes to tell me what your interests are, that would be great.

JA: Yeah, sure. So, I guess, trying to pin down exactly what you do sometimes is a bit difficult. But I guess, for the last several years I've been working somewhere in the intersections of an artist, curator, project coordinator and a gardener. And I guess that really speaks to my interests, which is in the intersection between art and ecology. And I'm really interested in how art practices can shape ecological ways of being, and how, through our practices, we can develop or explore different relationships between humans and the non-human world. Art practices can be an interesting way to kind of, let's say, 'provotype' (Wendy Gunn).

MZ: Sorry?

JA: To provotype. It's bringing provocation and the prototype together.

MZ: Provotype?

JA: Provotype, yeah. It's a provocative prototype. That's one way that art can do, but, you know, there's a number of different levels on which art practices can make us question things. Sometimes I'm quite reluctant to discuss things on purely artistic terms. And I guess that's why I've been working under the kind of banner of socially engaged practice, even though, I mean, it's still a problematic term. Isn't all art-making social? Of course. I guess it speaks to me in a way that I see the role art practices play as part of culture in general. And yes, I guess recently my interests have really been in exploring plant-human relations. I'm really interested in gardening as a practice where we can explore those relations, and the garden as site for exploring those relations. Gardening is a quite useful metaphor to work with, and in a very literal sense. This interest brought me to work on a three-year project with Deveron Projects, which is a sort of community food growing project of sorts, let's say. We, along with my colleagues Caroline Gatt, Camille Sineau, Lindy Young and later on with our intern Rhian Davies, were working over three years using food growing to not only try to think about how a rural community could re-think how it feeds itself, but also how the opportunity of coming together to learn to grow food was a really interesting and fruitful opportunity to also investigate the entanglement between human and more than human worlds. And that, I guess, was really our focus through the process

of growing food and gardening. We started to develop a kind of better understanding of ecology, one perhaps which de-centered the role of the human. And so, it's not that we weren't interested in people feeding themselves, but we were also questioning the kind of narrative that goes alongside this kind of 'grow your own' food movement , which can be problematic for a number of reasons. Quite often it can be alongside what is a kind of neoliberal or capitalist agenda, that is shifting the responsibility of dealing with the problem of feeding ourselves onto individuals in the community, rather than thinking of it as a broader, systematic or corporate practice.

MZ: Alright.

JA: And also, sometimes the narratives that these movements feed into are quite often looking back to some kind of past, you know, these ideas of reconnecting with the soil or reconnecting with the past relationship with the land, which perhaps didn't really exist. Or at least, if it did exist, it didn't exist without its own kind of problems. And that this idea of self-sufficiency could be quite a problematic kind of thing to idealize, or to try to achieve. So, we were kind of interested in all the other opportunities that growing food also brings. And that's, for joy, as much as it is for being a kind of critical lens to investigate other kinds of topics or issues. And that has led me since then, as part of a project finishing, to set up a seed library, which is a way of sharing seeds. It looks like a book library where people can borrow seeds. It's a form of commons, it's not owned by anyone, the seeds are held collectively. The idea is that people borrow seeds, grow them and then save seeds at the end of their growing season, and return those seeds back to the library, to keep it going

MZ: Cool!

JA: I became quite interested in seed-saving and also in the economy of the seed library, how that kind of economy can be looked at as a kind of non-capitalist economy. It can be looked at as an economy which, in a way, de-centers again the role of the human, because there's much more space for non-human agency, the agency of the seeds and plants. And it's also a way of trying to re-think economy where ecology is not seen as separate from it.

MZ: It sounds great.

JA: But I guess more broadly, I have been interested in listening and listening practices for a while. Actually, when I was studying in my undergrad, I was maybe calling myself some kind of sound artist, although I would not use that term now. I was really interested in sonic practices and practices of listening, particularly things like Pauline Oliveros and her idea of deep listening. Yeah. That kind of stuff. And so, I guess that in some ways it still informs what I do, even though I haven't done a lot recently,

specifically on listening. But it's still very much an interest.

MZ: Wow, that's a lot. Cool!

JA: Hope that's a good introduction!

MZ: Yeah, I just don't know how to process all this information now.

JA: I mean, maybe a way to start is a question I've been asking myself over the last few years, around listening. How can we develop listening practices that include the non-human?

MZ: Um…

JA: What does it mean to try and develop communicative habits with the non-human world? And this is something that we explored a little bit through some of our workshops while working at Deveron Projects. So, how can we develop these listening practices that include the non-human world, that take into account their own agency, desires and influences of their own?

MZ: It's interesting how you think of listening practices also related to the non-human. For me, I would say it's the opposite. I cannot see listening practices that doesn't have a human element in it.

JA: Hmm…

MZ: Maybe I can tell you briefly what I'm doing.

JA: Yes, sure.

MZ: So, for the past year and a half, since Corona started, it gives a sort of kick in my ass. I was in Jerusalem under a lockdown and I started to think more about collaboration rather than producing my own things. And then eventually I got to know about relational practices, socially engaged art and stuff like that. So, I started to read books, went to residencies, meet people… And now I'm still in the process of understanding many things. Whether there is any need to call it art or not, you also have all those questions about exploiting people when you work with them. I don't know, pedagogical projects, delegated performances… I'm still trying to figure out all those things. But I would say, one of the elements recurring throughout all the projects I'm following is non-productivity as a sort of way of resisting capitalism or other systems of evaluation. Even though at the end, you know, we are a little bit productive. For example, we produce a magazine, and we distribute it as a present. It provides us a common aim, but it's more an excuse to be together and to exchange ideas. The other recurrent element is, as said, working with people. The focus is on the relations between people and not on a certain product or authorship. I actually don't want to reject the

concept of authorship, I would rather say I'm going more towards a sort of shared authorship, a collective authorship in which I try to take a step back and position myself at the same level of the other people in the group. So, even if I take the role of the organizer, we all potentially have equal agencies and responsibility. I try to keep it horizontal and yet to figure out whether roles and hierarchies are actually important to keep. How to exchange roles? And then the whole issue of documentation, which is something I don't really like to do, I prefer to do things and not to take pictures, even before I was a photographer. Yeah, I've all those things in my mind and I think, very broadly, that all this connects to listening as a practice.

JA: Hmm…

MZ: Actually, if I think about listening as something that can foster care or give another value to vulnerability, I think we can learn many things also from the non-human world. As you said, seeds, plants and gardening, also connected to domestication, which I think relates to the listening topic. And all those projects, that for now are an online radio, a magazine and a room in Linz, are very located… Actually not located, but I would say on a small scale. They are sort of little Utopias in which people collaborate, do things together and share. I'm still trying to figure out whether this can be brought to a larger scale, and how the dynamics change. Lately I'm interested in what Brandon LaBelle wrote, I don't know if you know him.

JA: Of course I do.

MZ: Actually, we will be together in Berlin in July, at the Listening Biennial.

JA: Oh, great!

MZ: So, all this kind of intersection between sonic studies, participatory art, forms of resistance…

JA: Yeah, Brandon is a very interesting writer. I was fortunate enough to go to a workshop of his in London, super interesting. It was on eaves dropping.

MZ: So, inside all this cloud of things, I don't know, this conversation is as open as we want it to be. I mean, I could start to ask you questions, but maybe it's nicer if we start from what we like, or we can start from your question and then go on and see where we go.

JA: Sure. Yeah, I mean, however, you think it will useful for you, and I'm sure it will be useful for me as well, of course.

MZ: Cool.

JA: I guess this question is something I'm really interested

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in. And it's not to dismiss the importance of these listening practices inter-human, which can be more people-centered. I mean, I think that's also really important. But for me, the motives that I'm driven by are connected to the non-human. One of the major factors that has been driving, let's say, this climate ecological emergency, or crisis, or breakdown, or however you want to call it, is this sense of human exceptionalism. For me, this thing keeps cropping up and keeps becoming identified as one of the major factors. I'm really interested in how we can develop practices that don't necessarily erase the role of humans, but rather de-center them, in some way. And I guess I'm interested in the work of people like Jane Bennett, where she says things like, "Part of the ethical task in dealing with this is to cultivate the ability to discern non-human vitality, to come perceptually open to it." And for me, this fits into the wider task of learning to become affected by the non-human world. And I think that listening is a really important part of that task. It's certainly one of the ways that we can do that.

MZ: I'm thinking that we have two ways of approaching the same thing, two entry points. It just changes where you shift the focus. And I'm thinking of the non-human is an interesting approach, which may lead to the same results at the end. Because. I don't know very much about it, but it's this kind of 'lateral approach' to things in a non-direct way, without the explicit intention of changing something or solving a problem, but more entering from a side door, starting to do things in a more activist way. And then, something will change as a side effect. And here, thinking about the non-human might be useful

JA: Hmm…

MZ: What is your aim, your mission? Because in the end, OK, we can learn how to be affected by nature or non-human things, but why? Maybe that doesn't have to be the explicit reason for what you do, you know, but a sort of side effect.

JA: I mean, the aim is to create livable worlds for humans and non-humans. Worlds where the non-human world is not exploited and extracted, and not viewed as a resource purely for human exploitation. That is the task. You know, a modest one.

MZ: So modest! So, it's still human-centered.

JA: Of course, it's really difficult to escape that. You know, we can't escape the fact that we're human and… But even when you start to look at what constitutes human, we are already made from things that are more than human. When you start to think about what makes up yourself, the bacteria, the fungus, your gut flora, all these other things that are you, that make you, are already more than human. And it's not a case of completely erasing that category, I think

the position from which we come from plays a role. But as a task, it is important to start to recognize that humans are not exceptional. We are as much the problem as we are the solution, for sure. Recognizing that is realizing that we are not the only ones who have agency. Think about domestication for a minute. It's not necessarily a process which is just down to human ingenuity. You know, when we talk about rye for instance, I'm interested in that story because it's a way of telling a story where the role of the human is not the central role. It's one character, one actor in the story, but it's not the main one. And actually, within these processes, sometimes you can start to see the interdependence between all these actors. It's not necessarily that is equal or something. Quite often these relationships are asymmetrical.

MZ: Um…

JA: It's not necessarily that if you care about someone, you'll get that care back to you. I don't think it works like that. Someone who I've been very influenced by is Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, she talks about care being a human concept, but it's not to say that non-humans are not involved in that process. And so, yeah, I'm interested in exploring what these relationships are, trying to explore the stories and narratives that shift this sense of human exceptionalism, that create space to recognize the role the non-human play in supporting human life. That actually, maybe this relationship is reciprocal in some way. If you think of plants, we would not be on this planet if it wasn't for them and their amazing ability to photosynthesize. How can we view that relationship? It's them doing something in service of all of our needs, or can we start to do that in a much more open way, where perhaps we can start to think of plants as being collaborators or working partners?

MZ: I like that idea.

JA: So, getting back to your idea of developing these kinds of relationships with people who might help you produce the kind of activism you're interested in, or the kind of collaborative relationships you're interested in… Well, I'm interested in thinking about what it means to collaborate with plants. And I'm interested in what Natasha Myers says. She was a plant biologist before becoming an anthropologist. She is very interested in plant-human relations, and she talks about the need to 'conspire' with plants, which is a term taken from Timothy Choy, another anthropologist who looks at the meaning of conspiring, which comes from 'to breathe', so he recognizes that, for us to breathe, plants need to breathe. So, there's this kind of mutual relationship there. But there is also another meaning of conspiring, which means to work together, to plot against something. To plot against the neoliberal capitalist system, which is destroying the planet. To plot against it with our greatest allies: plants. And of course, that's super abstract and theoretical. What does that mean in practice? Those are the

things that I'm trying to explore. And I think that listening is an important tool for that.

MZ: So, do you actually see listening as a tool?

JA: Yeah, I mean, I guess calling it a tool comes with a whole load of baggage. I think it's certainly something that… Maybe it's better to call it a practice.

MZ: Or methodology.

JA: Right. I imagine you agree with this, I think it's something we are bad at. We like to think we're good at listening, but… I think, in a climate where so many things are trying to grab our attention, I'm really interested in the idea of unproductivity. I think that's a really interesting one, particularly in this kind of attention economy, where everything is trying to get your attention too. You know, there are practices of listening, but also practices of un-listening.

MZ: Practices of un-listening?

JA: Yeah, this is why I guess I'm interested in people like Pauline Oliveros, because of our attention to the practice of listening, this real commitment to thinking and listening. You know, the Deep Listening practice really encapsulates the spectrum of what listening is. Again, from listening for joy, to listening on a much more practical level or something. Actually, I don't know if Pauline was interested in the non-human… I can't think of any exercise that she does in that direction. Oh, but yes I guess she did a lot of excesses about listening to your environment!

MZ: Yes, it's more about soundscapes.

JA: Exactly.

MZ: I thought I was interested in what she said, but then I found out it's really, really a lot about hearing. Listening with the ears in this conscious state of your environment. And for me, now that I am digging deeper and deeper in this topic, I find listening not that much connected to hearing anymore. And that's why, for me, it's really about people, it's about caring, organizing things together, communicating, being unproductive together, learning mutually from each other… And it's clever what you said before, looking at care as something that is not necessarily mutual. So, for example, we can say plants care about us because they provide oxygen, and thinking how we can care about plants. But actually, they are not doing that for us. I don't know exactly how to put it into words, but in my head it sounds like an interesting concept, this way of giving freely without expecting anything back. And maybe, this is also something that we can learn from non-human interactions.

JA: Hmm… Yeah, definitely. I guess this is the idea of the gift.

MZ: Exactly. It's a very powerful practice.

JA: Yeah.

MZ: That's also what we are trying to use in our 1+1=3 project. We print the paper at home, and we give it for free. On the cover, we can write something that relates to the person we are going to give it to.

JA: And what's the expectation when people receive this for free?

MZ: I guess there are no expectations. They can read it, keep it, it's a publication. If they want, they can join the group, of course. It's inclusive, so that anyone that finds the paper can join it and contribute to the next issue or to the collective discussions. We meet on Zoom every once in a while to discuss things and how to structure the next issue. Everything is pretty collaborative and horizontal.

JA: Sounds interesting.

MZ: But going back to the small-scale concept, I'm really struggling with it. Apart from defining my role inside the group as organizer, artist, Matteo… Who am I for the others? But also, how to manage balance between inclusivity and sense of belonging? So, it appears to me that the more the group is inclusive, the more you lose a bit of this cozy feeling of being part of something and working all together. I don't want to think that the solution is to keep it close. People should always, by their own free will, say, "OK, I give as much of my time as I can and want." Without being bound to any kind of duty. I don't know, have you ever encountered this issue?

JA: I guess we did, maybe in a slightly different way. Quite often, one of the critiques that we encountered in our last project in Scotland is that we're always working with the same people. It's always the same people that come to participate in it, and sometimes it can feel like it's a bit of an echo-chamber, where you're only talking to people who share similar ideas and opinions, and this can be a problem. And of course, it can also be really important in terms of building movements. To do that, you have to invest in the relationships with the ones that turn up all the time, who want to participate. Those are the ones that start to build momentum, right? And it's only through developing those relationships that you can then start to include other people in different ways. I think that the really important thing is to develop a sense of belonging

MZ: Which kind of belonging?

JA: For me, it's always a sense of ecological belonging, you know, what does that mean. A sense of belonging and trust. You know, within a group is really important, and not something to be dismissed. But that dynamic you develop,

can also be so easily changed, and not necessarily in a good way. I think it is really hard to remain open to that possibility, but also trying to create a sense of momentum, a movement that you're building up with this closed group of people… I don't have an answer to that.

MZ: It's pretty tricky, I know.

JA: I think it's a really difficult work. And I totally sympathize with you in that. In those situations, there is always this sort of tension between doing that kind of work of wanting to be inclusive, to invite as many people as possible, but yeah, of course knowing that that possibility in itself could totally destroy you and what you're doing! I don't know, it's a difficult one, isn't it?

MZ: Sure it is. And there is another dangerous approach, often used by social design: the problem-solving approach in which you go to a fucked-up community situation and you, as a privileged artist or designer, you are trying to make it better for the people there. From what I understood, the focus of Deveron Projects is more on the town of Huntly, as you say, "The town is the venue." And from there you try to be present in the community with agency, if I understood well. How do you see these two approaches?

JA: You mean the approach of the outsider artist coming in to solve the problem?

MZ: Exactly.

JA: Sometimes, who comes from a different place or a different situation can bring really important insights that you might have completely overlooked or you might not have been willing to think about. And that can definitely happen. But I think it is also dangerous. We often feel the need to protect the community from artists that are coming in, as much as we are protecting the artists from the community! It comes down to having permission, whether this person is invited into the community or not. Sometimes it can produce really interesting results, but also, it can be really risky.

MZ: I agree.

JA: And, you know, sometimes you do just need someone to take kick over the apple cart and see which way the apples roll, right? It needs to happen, but I think it can be done in sensitive ways. And I don't always think that artists are the right people to do that, particularly when artists hold on to this idea that they somehow have some kind of insight, or genius, that other people don't. I think that's a really dangerous idea, when we talk about art.

MZ: Do you also see those kinds of dynamics happening to the non-human world? Artists as outsiders who go to

nature and try to save it?

JA: Yeah, definitely. Of course. I think those things are also taking place in ecological communities, which are including non-humans.

MZ: Sorry, how did you call it?

JA: Ecological communities. I guess it's harder to know whether a plant has given you permission to work with it! In that sense, it really is about being grateful and thankful and sensitive as best as you can. That's the ethical question of the social-engaged practices, that really comes down to that.

MZ: Yeah, exactly.

JA: You know, this idea of hospitality or something like that.

MZ: Hospitality?

JA: Yes. I think this idea of hospitality remains one of the key ethical questions of social practices. You know, the role of guest and host, and whether those kinds of categories are upheld or disrupted. Yeah, it's really tricky. I'm trying to think of an example…

MZ: That would be great!

JA: Maybe this is an interesting one to think about. This project from Deveron Projects is called 'Weeping Willow Tree', I don't know if you came across it on their website. And so, it started off trying to find a way to mark the UK exiting from the European Union. And to find a way of dealing within a community where divisions and opinions were, let's say, not necessarily being made explicit, but quite often hidden. Yeah, there were clear divisions within the community about Brexit. And so they invited a German artist called Clemens Wilhelm to develop a project. And his proposal was to plant a weeping willow tree in the town. That would be this kind of living monument to Brexit

MZ: Alright.

JA: Well, the weeping willow tree has these two different connotations, one connected to sorrow, the other to hope, regeneration. You can very easily cut a branch off and replant in the ground, it will take root very easily. So, he wanted to plant this tree and create a space where the community could gather together to meet, to discuss, to maybe think about and repairing some of the friendships that had been damaged through the process of Brexit. But the project was really contentious, first of all, this artist came with his own idea without consulting with the community. And actually, some people within the community initially became quite angry. They were like, "Is this artist wanting

to plant this tree here?!" And as it turned out, part of the reason for that was just the location. He chose the wrong location for it, and people were disappointed because he did it without their input.

MZ: That makes sense.

JA: And then because of this, the artist held a meeting with people in the community, invited them to come along and hear about the project, to discuss where the tree should go. He opened that discussion with this idea that the project was really about dealing with the deep divisions that Brexit has caused, finding a way to repair them. And many of the people in the community that turned up said, "There are no divisions within the community, we don't need to repair them. You, as the artist, are the one who's caused these divisions!" Which is really interesting because, well, when you start to uncover that, it's not that the divisions were not there, it's just that people didn't want to talk about that. Maybe the artist had brought this to light. But many with the community didn't think art should deal with politics. And by proposing to plant this tree, we were doing a very dangerous thing, that was bringing art into politics and politics into art.

MZ: But that's unavoidable!

JA: Exactly. All art is political in one sense, right? And maybe just not politics with a big 'P', which is what I think they were kind of meaning. Anyway, the project, after various problems and disruptions, some of which were the fact that Brexit kept postponing and changing dates, finally this tree got planted. The ceremony around it was really amazing and powerful. We had a procession of people holding lanterns, walking through the town. We had a number of people in the community who became tree guardians and they pledged a commitment to look after the tree. People sang and read poetry, we all drank whisky. You know, it was one of the few times I've had that kind of experience from an art project, honestly. And it was because the people in the community came from all sides of the fence. I mean, it was not necessarily completely representative of the whole community, never could have been. But there was a diversity of voices in terms of what people thought of Brexit, that's for sure. And now this tree is planted and has a bench round it where people can meet and sit. What that means in the long term, I don't know. But I wonder how would that project played out if the artists, you know, had a different standpoint. And had worked in a different way. And, you know, the tree has now been vandalized a number of times, but there is a will and it keeps getting replanted. The responsibility of the tree guardians, the people that made this pledge, is to do it. They have a number of trees potted up, that they're looking after somewhere else, ready for the replacement. Which I think it's also kind of sad and interesting as well.

MZ: Pretty sad…

JA: But there is this beautiful bench that people go and sit and have conversations with other people around. So, yeah, I think that's quite a rich example to think through this problem.

MZ: Yes. To me, it's also a significant example of creating opportunities for people to meet through an intervention or event. Just like speaking to people, you create a sort of environment in which people can share opinions and discuss something. At least for me, it's not any more about 'what' we discuss, but 'how' we deal with whichever topic. But again, it's important that the community got together, discussed and thought together about things.

JA: Yeah. Maybe this project was never going to be able to deal with the reparations of dealing with Brexit. I don't think the artist necessarily listened completely to the community. I don't think he necessarily listened to the tree, either. I mean, for me it's important the role that the tree plays in all this, and the responsibility to deal with grief, sorrow and divisions, that the tree takes on. I mean, was the permission asked to the tree? I don't think you can ever answer this, but for me, it's still interesting to think about that. Was it worth pursuing this project, even though the way that it was set up, the conditions under which it began, were hugely problematic? Like you said, it still created this opportunity for this community to come together, to share a space.

MZ: That seems like a powerful output, at the end of the day.

JA: Yeah. I'm sort of interested to see what happens in the next few years, whether the tree keeps being cut down and replanted. It's a real tragedy.

MZ: Isn't it another sort of conspiracy, maybe?

JA: Could be! If it keeps getting cut down, then maybe that's what the community wants…