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This is the published version of a paper published in *Periskop*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Nyberg, L. (2020)

Induction: an unknown at the heart of our lives

Periskop, (24): 48-61

<https://doi.org/10.7146/periskop.v2020i24.126177>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

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INDUCTION: An Unknown at the Heart of Our Lives

(STENGERS 2015, 47)

INTRODUCTION

This is an invitation to a practice, an induction, in the form of a text. I take the word induction from hypnotherapy and the teachings of Milton H. Erickson, as a series of suggestions that, if accepted, will lead one to a trance-like state (Rosen 1991). The concept of trance, for Erickson, is not something extra-ordinary, it is the equivalent of daydreaming, staring out the window, or the flow that comes from intense exercise or creative work (Erickson and Rossi 1976, 18). It is a state that we, under the right conditions, can access by ourselves. The trance state is useful because it is an adaptive state (Webber and Thomas n.d.): “a state of increased awareness and responsiveness to ideas” (Erickson 1958, 729). It opens a path to the unconscious, giving us a chance to take a look at those deep-set ideas and beliefs about ourselves and the world that we do not usually access or question.

The aim of this practice is to bring together two theoretical texts into an embodied practice, by using techniques from hypnotic induction and guided meditation. The texts that I have chosen, one by Isabelle Stengers and one by the Decolonial Futures Collective, offer us two powerful imageries that capture the structure of modernity and its destabilization, sparked by the current climate crisis. Imagery that begs a response. I have chosen to stay close to the original texts, breaking them up to allow more space for body and breath. Rewriting them this way is an attempt at offering an embodied way of approaching theoretical texts and is part of my pedagogical effort to engage our bodies in our understanding of this moment. It stems from my conviction that to be able to engage in the future unknown, we will have to bring our full selves, all that we can make intelligible: every sense, every cell, every process, every connection.

My teaching generally comes with the invitation that we will use this time and place to study together. I offer the same invitation with this practice. I teach as an artist, and I do art as a teacher. This is the place from which I pose my questions. The “we” I am addressing here are mainly other teacher-artists and art-teachers. We who walk in and out of educational institutions and art spaces to do our “practice,” however ill- or well-defined. We who are invited to visit. We who study in activist and community spaces. We who see teaching as relational work; who study as we teach and learn together with others. We who try to transgress the borders of education and the walls of institutions. We who spatter paint on the white walls and leave traces of mud on the floors. We who turn our gaze on the space, the institution, and its structures, tearing at the wallpaper to find what is beneath. We who organize every space, attempting to build relations, foster communities, and ready the soil for growing change.

That is why, for me, this is also a pedagogical experiment in using text to perform the role of the guide or the teacher. The text works as a score, an instruction, a guide. This is my compromise since I cannot be present with you, the reader. The materiality of this practice is a text printed on paper—you can hold the words in your hands. While reading I will ask you to engage your senses in the service of imagination. I will invite you to drop down into your body: to follow the traction of gravity and connect with the body that is you, and with the body of Earth that you rest on. The being that encompass all the complex relations of land, sea, soil and atmosphere, and all the dead and living things that together make: Gaia.

Gaia is one of the Greek primordial deities. She is the personification of the Earth, the ancestral mother of all life, the goddess Mother Earth. In the story told by Isabelle Stengers, Gaia is she who intrudes (Stengers 2015). She is making her presence known as an entity of her own right. Not simply a symbolic other, but as a person to be reckoned with: a powerful other—a mother that is not only there to nourish and protect us, but who is a person with her own mind, intruding into the man-made order of things, bringing chaos, or calling back a lost order.

Stengers names her a being, *something* that becomes *someone* who is more than the sum of her processes (Stengers 2015, 44–45). Gaia is a person equipped with history, activity, and sensitivity. This being holds together a complex set of processes and relations in a way that has so far been in our favour, but might not be any longer. She has left behind her traditional role as a caretaker and stepped into her power to question us all. She is not holding it together (Stengers 2015, 45), she is letting go.

Gaia is ticklish. When we disturb her, she responds with disproportionate measures, shrugging us off like irritating bugs (Stengers 2015, 46). Our actions as human beings has provoked a cascade of unforeseeable responses. We depend on her—she tolerates us. We must pay attention not to offend her (Stengers 2015, 62). This induction is an invitation to feel the impact of Gaia’s intrusion: on our habitat, on our houses, on our bodies.

Naming her Gaia is an act of imagination. “To name is not to say what is true but to confer on what is named the power to make us feel and think in the mode that the name calls for” (Stengers 2015, 43). Stengers offer us this powerful being, Gaia, to think and feel with. She gives flesh to what seems un-graspable; she gives us a presence to witness, a body to connect with, a person to speak to; she offers us the possibility of using our imagination to build a relationship with the complex and powerful processes that the Earth holds.

Naming, for Paulo Freire, is a pedagogical act in the service of liberation. In his quest for the oppressed to be more fully human, the power to *name the world* is essential for stepping into the agency that is central to claiming one’s humanity. Dialogue stands at the center of Freire’s pedagogical theory, and dialogue demands of us to speak a *true word*—a word that contains both the element of action and reflection (Freire 1970, 88). A word that performs. A word that transforms. Naming is in this case a creative act, an act of creation, of adding to the story of our world.

Naming is not a finite act. “Once *named*, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*” (Freire 1970, 69). Gaia that intrudes will return to us to be re-named, over and over again, as we engage in the transformation of our world. In this practice, we are purposefully aiming away from the colonial act of naming to claim power over others by ways of categorization and systematization. Naming is not made to label, sort, and place into hierarchies. We aim to use naming as a performative act: to give life, form, and space to what we need to imagine otherwise.

The Decolonial Futures collective gives name and form to the pillars of Western epistemology as “the house that modernity built” (Andreotti, Stein, and Susa 2018). This house is our home and our minds’ prison. We encounter the world from a place that is built on separation, with two carrying walls, one of universal reason built on enlightenment humanism, one of the modern nation state, and a heavy roof of capitalism that threatens to overwhelm the house with endless growth. This house is not well. I have placed this house on the surface of Gaia to establish the connection between our human-made environmental crisis and the cultures that provoked it. Not all humans have brought on the intrusion

of Gaia—it is not “humanity” that is responsible, it is certain human cultures. Gaia intrudes because of the dominance of our Western culture(s), the systems they produce, and the privileged behaviours they encourage. Gaia intrudes because of what the house of modernity keeps teaching us: a desire for accumulation, growth and progress, for mastery and certainty, for consensus, coherence, and control.

Thankfully, we can change culture, shift our values and beliefs, and change our habits. We can do the work to dismantle capitalism, unsettle and decolonize our cultures, and imagine otherwise. Central to this transformation is an epistemological shift away from the epistemology of the house of modernity. This shift demands of us to reconsider what knowledge is, what is worth knowing, as well as what the purpose of knowing might be. It questions our desire, not for knowledge, but for *knowing*. For being the ones who know how to know (Rancière 2016, 27). For claiming certainty. Inspired by Spivak, this practice aims towards an “uncoercive re-arrangement” (Spivak 2012, 110) of those desires towards more unstable, vulnerable, and arable grounds.

PREPARATION

This text should be read in a place where you can be undisturbed. A place where you can feel safe enough to let attention drift from what is going on around you, and where you have space to let your mind wander. I will ask you to follow the dots on the page with your fingertip. For a more sensuous experience, you can take a sharp pencil or needle, before you begin, and from the backside of the page make little holes on each dot. This way you will have small elevations in the paper that you can follow with your fingertip when you start reading.

Find yourself a comfortable position. You can sit in a chair, by a table, on a sofa, on a bed, or on the floor. Take off your shoes. Consider your level of energy. Make sure that you are warm enough for sitting still. You can use extra clothes or a blanket to support yourself, rolled up under your seat, behind your back, or over your shoulders or feet to keep warm.

Hold this text in your hand or lay it out on the table in front of you. Make sure your other hand is free to move over the page. Remember that you are free to shift and move around during this practice. There is no need to sit perfectly still. Stillness is not static. What we aim for is a focused attention and the ability to stay with the practice. Allowing for the body-mind to be, here, still.

Make an effort to slow down, to find a rhythm that is calmer than your day-to-day pace. You can pause, close your eyes, and take a breath whenever it is needed. When you're ready to continue, your fingertip will guide you back to the text.

Let's get started.

GOING IN

Let the air leave your body
and fill it up again
breathing
with intention
to bring oxygen and life
to all parts of your body
Breathing into
nose
sinuses
lungs
stomach

Breathe out tension
in your jaw
neck
shoulders
lower back
hips
Let the energy
of your breath
slip through the cavities in your hip bones
down your legs
and feet

Awaken your senses:
taste inside the mouth
the smells entering your nose
ears open in all directions
the sense of your clothes against your skin
light and colour caught by your eyes
the touch of your fingertip to this paper

Let your breath touch your heart
let it gently massage the cavities in your chest
to bring spaciousness and softness
around the heart
Search for all the points of connection
of your body to the surface beneath you
it might be your feet, your sit bones, your back
register the points of pressure
and how they differ in intensity

Notice how your body rests
supported
by the weave of the fabric
and the structure of the furniture
beneath you
Sense how the energy you produce is met with energy from below
reaching for you
to be touched
and held



The floor beneath you is connected to the walls
held in balance by the construction of the building
secured into the foundation of the house
sunken into the ground for stability
supported by soil and rock
Held in tension
by the curved surface of the Earth's crust
a connecting circle
the vastness of the globe beneath you

There she is
Gaia
the body on which you rest

Take a moment to imagine Gaia
to sense her presence
follow the circle by touch

GAIA

Gaia is a powerful being
a planet body
tumbling through space
hot lava at her core
a thin crust of soil
and a cool, bright atmosphere
protecting her surface from the rays of the Sun

We rest our bodies on her
her lap is our home
our den
our bit of luck in endless darkness
her soil is the place from which we grow

Appreciate the air entering your body
that it is safe and clean
not too warm or too cold
not too damp or too dry
How the thin atmosphere protects us from deep space
and the entire ecosystem
the whole being of Gaia
is engaged to keep the balance of oxygen to nitrogen
that is the air that we breathe



Studying the face of Gaia
you recognize the impact of anthropogenic climate change
the rising temperature
and how it is producing storms, droughts, heat waves, and thaw
You witness the rapid loss of life
as populations of species are getting heavily reduced or extinct
trapped on smaller and smaller habitats
surrounded by humanities' monocultures
You identify the plastic islands in the sea
and the microplastics in your drinking water

The continuation of human life on this Earth is not guaranteed
neither is life for most of our companion species
large populations of animals are already gone
the seabeds are suffocating
the ice is melting
methane gas is rising towards the surface
There are high levels of energy in the atmosphere
leading to extreme weather

You have experienced bad weather before
suffocating heat
pinching cold
winds that bully you
You have stood at the shore of roaring seas
you have felt the power of Gaia
you might think you know her

But this is another time
this storm will not pass to return next year
this cold will not be avoided indoors
this heat will not cool in the night
this flood will not return to sea

Take a second
to notice the rhythm of your pulse
and the tempo of your breath

THE HOUSE

On the surface of Gaia
there is a house
a familiar, square building
This is the house that modernity built

Many of us grew up in this house
it fostered our view of the world
through the frames of its windows
Many of us grew up in its shadow
and adapted our lives in response to its needs and demands

On one side there is a carrying wall
built with the bricks from Enlightenment humanism
it is the wall of universal reason
that teaches us to sort our knowledge in straight lines of logic
first this, then that,
either or, neither nor
It teaches us to separate what our bodies know
from what our minds can comprehend

On the other side is a carrying wall
built on the principles of liberal rights and justice
it is the wall of the modern nation states
teaching us how to draw borders
and build walls
to keep out
what will not be acknowledged
within

The roof
over our heads
consists of global capital
held together by shareholder financial capitalism
that carries traces of industrial capitalism and state socialism
teaching us in the church of progress, holy capital, and limitless growth

Looking closely
you can see that this house is not well
When you run your fingers over the walls
you can follow the cracks that start from the bottom
spreading upwards like trees
You find damp roses of discolouration on the ceiling
the air is hard to breathe
and there is a strange smell

You go down to the cellar
to see the plumbing is extracting oil from the ground
and dumping the waste in the backyard
Water comes in clean
and goes out polluted

This house stands on a foundation of separation
from the Earth
and from all living things that together makes Gaia
It teaches us to separate ourselves from the natural world
and to sort and catalogue each other into hierarchies

This foundation of separation
installs fears in us
Fear of change
of scarcity,
worthlessness,
destitution,

existential emptiness,
loss, pain, and death

It shakes us with fear of
impermanence,
incompetence,
and insignificance

So, we compensate
by developing a desire for
accumulation,
for mastery and certainty,
for consensus, coherence
and control

These desires become naturalized
entitlements
that calibrate our hopes and fantasies
This house limits how we think
it limits our imagination

LET GO

Our systems are not resilient to the intrusion of Gaia
eventually they will start to fail
What will we do when the power goes out?
When there is no heating in our house
when we are missing food on our table
and medicine for our kids
There will be war
and we will have to decide whether to stay or go

Gaia's intrusion is unstoppable
we feel it accelerating with every turn of this globe
She is deaf to our pleas for mercy
ignorant of our efforts to make things right
She does not care who is responsible
she is not just
she is not fair
She will not take the role as the righter of wrongs
Gaia does not acknowledge our systems of life,
our money, our Gods, our ethics, our politics
our attempts at love

So, we allow for grief
to break open our hearts
to the inequality of loss
to the unbearable unfairness
that is built into our systems

As power breaks it will show itself
in its most bare and brutal form
there will be no looking away from the houses that we've built
and how they have corrupted us

We will need to let go of our house
We will need to let go of our desire for control and mastery
We will need to let go of defences
of our search for solutions to protect our/this way of life
We will have to find shelter elsewhere

Let go of any attempt to draw a straight line
from what you already know into the future
there are no linear predictions to be made
that would be too optimistic
Do not underestimate how fast and in what scale this change will take form

Recognize the limits of your knowledge
the restrictions of your experience
the failure of reason in face of catastrophe

Every knowledge is also an ignorance
so shift your attention
from knowing to learning
to a study of the unknown
a state of deep adaptation

Resilience asks us "how do we keep what we really want to keep?"
Relinquishment asks us "what do we need to let go of in order to not make
matters worse?"
Restoration asks us "what can we bring back to help us with the coming difficulties
and tragedies?"

We train for a state of readiness
Here, present and ready

THE UNKNOWN

Gaia asks nothing of us,
she demands nothing.
Her silence is unsettling,
she makes us unsure of how to respond.
How can we answer when there is no question?

The intrusion of Gaia puts a major unknown at the heart of our lives.

This unknown cannot be overcome,
it is not a temporary hurdle or an abyss to cross,
it is here to stay.

The unknown is not a problem to be solved
or a moment that will pass.

We will have to live, in all the ways we can,
with this intrusion to our lives.

Gaia came with a gift that was also a burden. A surprise.
How can we grasp the unknown she has placed with us?

Try to hold it, lightly.

Can you place it between your fingertips? Do your arms fit around it?

Can you lean on it, like a tree or a big rock?

Can you sense it as a drop of water on your upper lip?

What weight does it hold?

Can it carry its own weight? Or does it need you to support it?

How does it move?

Do you feel a vibration from its core?

Can you sense it pulsating? Does it hold a rhythm?

Does it move with the tempo of eternity, a slow river, a light breeze?

Does it turn around itself? A baby turning in the stomach of their mother,
a pebble rolling as a wave hits the shore?

Does it attract everything around it, like a black hole threatening to swallow us?

Or is it an expansive universe, ready to explode?

Listen to this being. Sense its presence.

Let it take form in your imagination.

Feel it inside you. Outside of you. Between us.

Stay with it.

Take a moment to leave the page
let your breath touch your heart and your mind drift
shut your eyes
observe the pictures
screened on the inside of your eyelids

Welcome back
Put your hand on your heart

LIVING ON TOGETHER

How do we live with this unknown at the heart of our lives?

How do we account for this strange presence?

How do we accept that it will impact our lives in unforeseen ways?

Living with the unknown close to heart
means no knowledge has privilege over the other

there is no expertize
no one person has the proper answers
We will have to resist the temptation
to offer hasty solutions
We will have to resist the temptation to separate
and sort according to learnt systems of categorization
not to trust familiar methodologies
and the material we are used to thinking with

Instead, we take care of our doubts
and allow ourself to hesitate
to be wary
to stammer
and pay attention to what makes us think

We look for connections
and for questions that cannot be appropriated
We find common causes to gather around
in careful collectivity
thinking together as a work to be done

Becoming-with others is how we render each other capable
We are never alone
there is no moving forward by ourselves
We find room to respond
in a multitude of voices
to what initiated Gaia's intrusions
and the consequences of it

There is a strange joy in the presence of catastrophe
that we get to spend time with what's truly important to us
while still holding it lightly

We enter the portal with an awareness
of what we want to let go
and what we want to keep

This future unknown carries no promise
But it offers us work to do
We study for the unknown
We engage without guarantees
We practice our skills of deep adaptation
we respond with all our senses
our full bodies
attending to the movement of this moment
the joy of the first step, even if it is uneasy

Take a breath
look up
Find the horizon
Find a person to connect with

This text contains more or less modified fragments of texts, mainly from (Stengers 2015) and (Andreotti, Stein, and Susa 2018).

The concept of deep adaptation comes from (Bendell 2018).

“Every knowledge is also an ignorance” is from a quote from (Oliviera Andreotti, Vanessa de. 2012)

The future as a surprise is influenced by (Anderson 2010).

The material we are used to thinking with, and the concept of becoming-with comes from (Haraway 2016).

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Lisa Nyberg's contribution has been peer reviewed.