Design For This Century
Week 11: Environment and Resilience

November 11, 2021

Discussion Response

Hildyard's work reminded me of a book I read recently called The Unreality of Memory by Elisa Gabbert. Through a series of essays Gabbert examines the psychological, biological, and social factors which make it possible for humans, as a species, to be confronted by incredibly dire circumstances such as climate change and take no action. As Hildyard tactfully shows us, it is only through her intimate experience with the pigeon that she begins to consider the enormous ideas of natural interconnectedness and human caused environmental change. In more abstracted language Gabbert describes the other side of this experience -- how humans are wired to avoid comprehending the circumstances of plague, famine, war, and environmental crisis unless confronted by their effects. She lays this foundation not as an excuse for lack of action, but to describe a blind spot which humanity, as a whole, needs to correct for. Understanding that a series of cause and effect is too large for direct comprehension is an important first step in figuring out where change can happen.

To create a logical solution for a seemingly illogical problem requires addressing it from multiple perspectives at the same time. Art can be an incredibly powerful tool for seamlessly shifting a viewer's attention from the gigantically illogical to the immediately tangible. As creative practitioners, I believe that we can help make the intangible tangible in addressing climate change and broadening the general understanding of environmental awareness. Creating awareness and perspective is only one part of the challenge, however. Once you've gotten people's attention and it's clear that they finally care enough to take action what do you do next? As we've seen from the Uros and the Marker Wadden the tools to address the problems of climate change and lack of environmental awareness do, in fact, exist. The methodologies of Design (by which I mean capital D Design, as a field) are well positioned between what is socially addressable and technologically achievable to effect change.

These two works are really interesting examples of using design to work with and not against the natural systems in a place. What I find notable about this approach is its unspoken, but persistent challenge of "human" time. When we approach a design problem from a purely man-made or manufactured perspective, we often situate our solution within a certain scope of time. These spans are short and constrained by the social constructs which consider only human attentions and needs: the durability of the materials in an object, the amount of time someone is interested in purchasing a product, the fleeting novelty of a product's use, the duration a built space will be occupied, the forward motion of technological advancement or scientific knowledge. In contrast, the design solutions proposed in the two reading examples use a very different sense of time to achieve success or failure.

The Uros have been living in the same way for over four thousand years not because they have created a brilliant foundation of functional material science -- though that is one valid way to look at it and shouldn't be discounted -- but because they have chosen to align their own sense of time to that of the natural processes around them. It takes time for the root masses -- khili -- cut from the reed beds to grow and fuse into a single buoyant and living structure. The wait is clearly worth the integrity of the new island which can last up to 25 years and simply fades back into the waters of Titicaca when it has reached the end of its days. In the same token, the Marker Wadden project wasn't just a reorganization of human built materials which took as much time to construct as any other structure. Their reimagination of the

coastal region involved working with the processes of silt deposition, sand dune formation, and the mating cycles of water fowl. The way time moves through these processes is well outside the scope of our internet fueled day to day.

So what is the ultimate goal of climate action you may be wondering? How will we know when we've defeated climate change? When will we possess "enough" environmental awareness? Some argue that stability is the end goal; a world where the environment around us behaves in predictable and accountable ways. This is a world where human activity does not cause dramatic and seemingly damaging shifts in the atmosphere that surrounds it. When we invoke this idea of environmental stability there is, again, a sense of time. Human memory and activity on this earth spans a miniscule fraction of the history of the natural world, however. As Tega Brain points out in her paper, The Environment is Not a System, "from a geological point of view this is an absurdly small slice of time." How can humans, "absurdly small" in time and space, define stability and resilience when we can only see a tiny fraction of the whole? Who knows. It seems like we better try though. I think art is a good place to start.

A big handful of questions to ponder here:

How can we, as creative practitioners, help create a sense of immediacy and tangibility in the discussion of climate change?

Can you point to a moment in your life so far where you've directly had a harmful or uncomfortable experience which was rooted in human imposed change on the environment?

Thinking back on this moment, how does it relate to your present and persistent understanding of climate change?
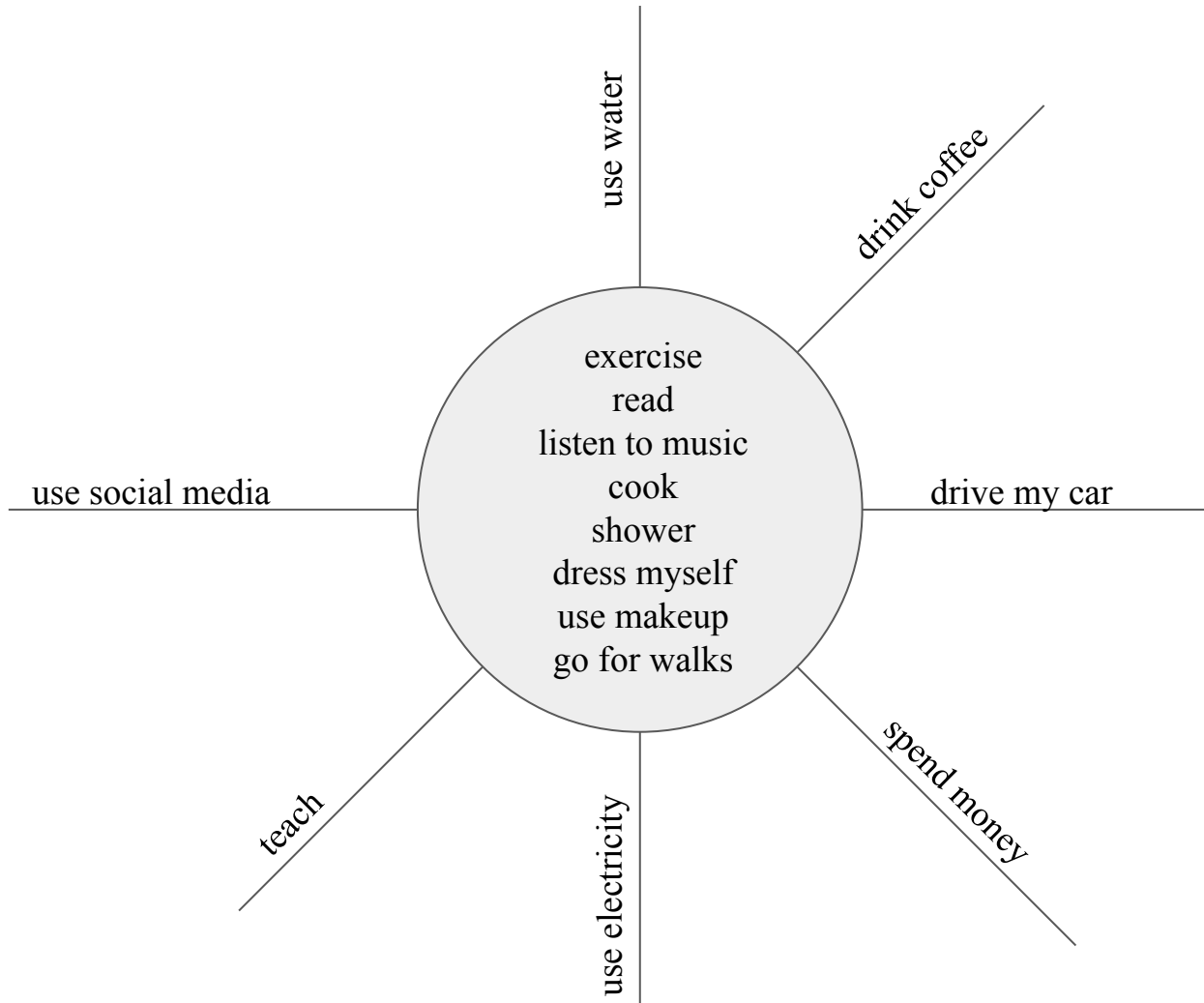
Can you think of a situation in which you encountered something where you were unsure if it was of natural or manmade / artificial origin? If so, how did that make you feel?
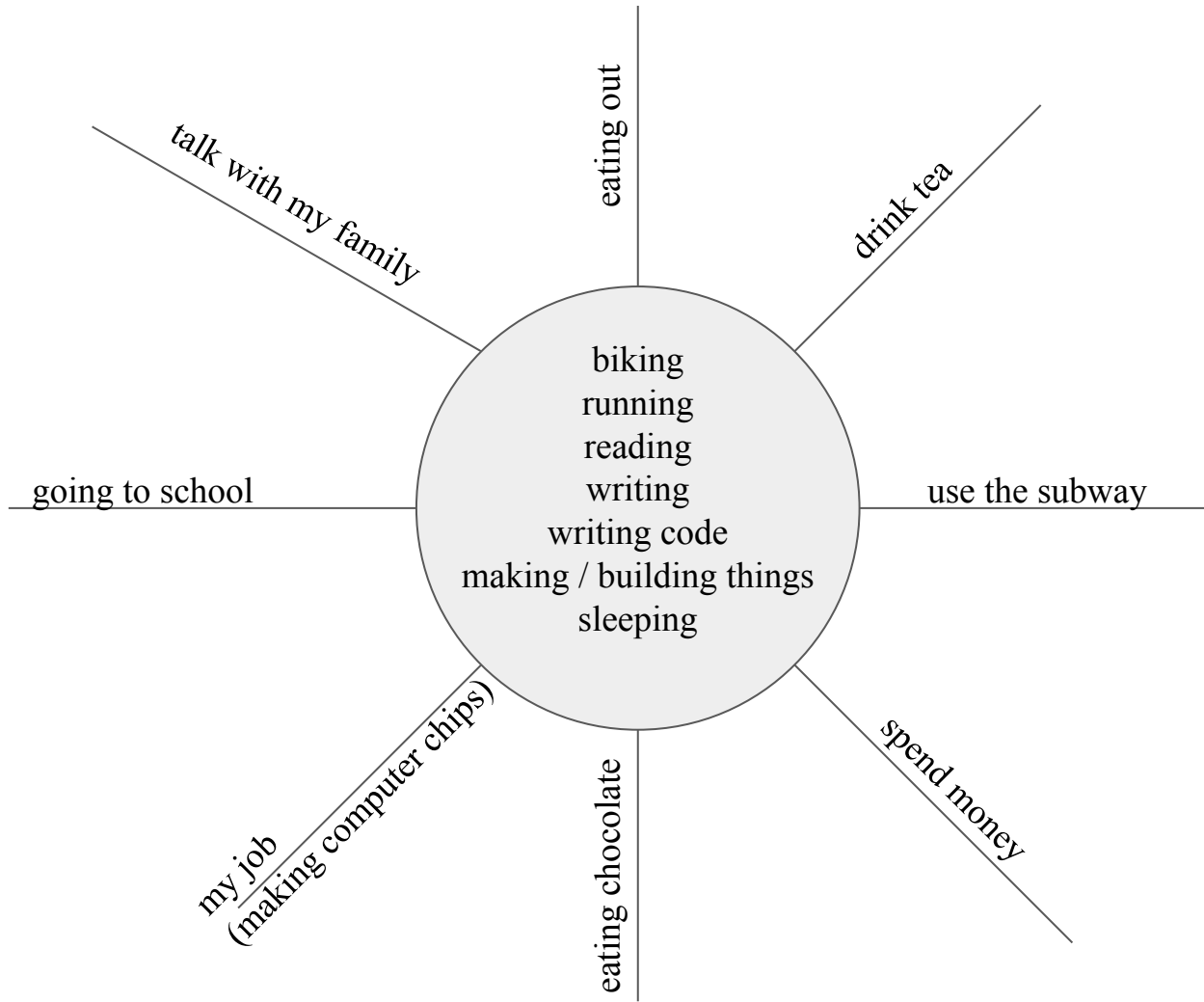
Do you consider humans to be part of the natural world? Are you, yourself part of the natural world?
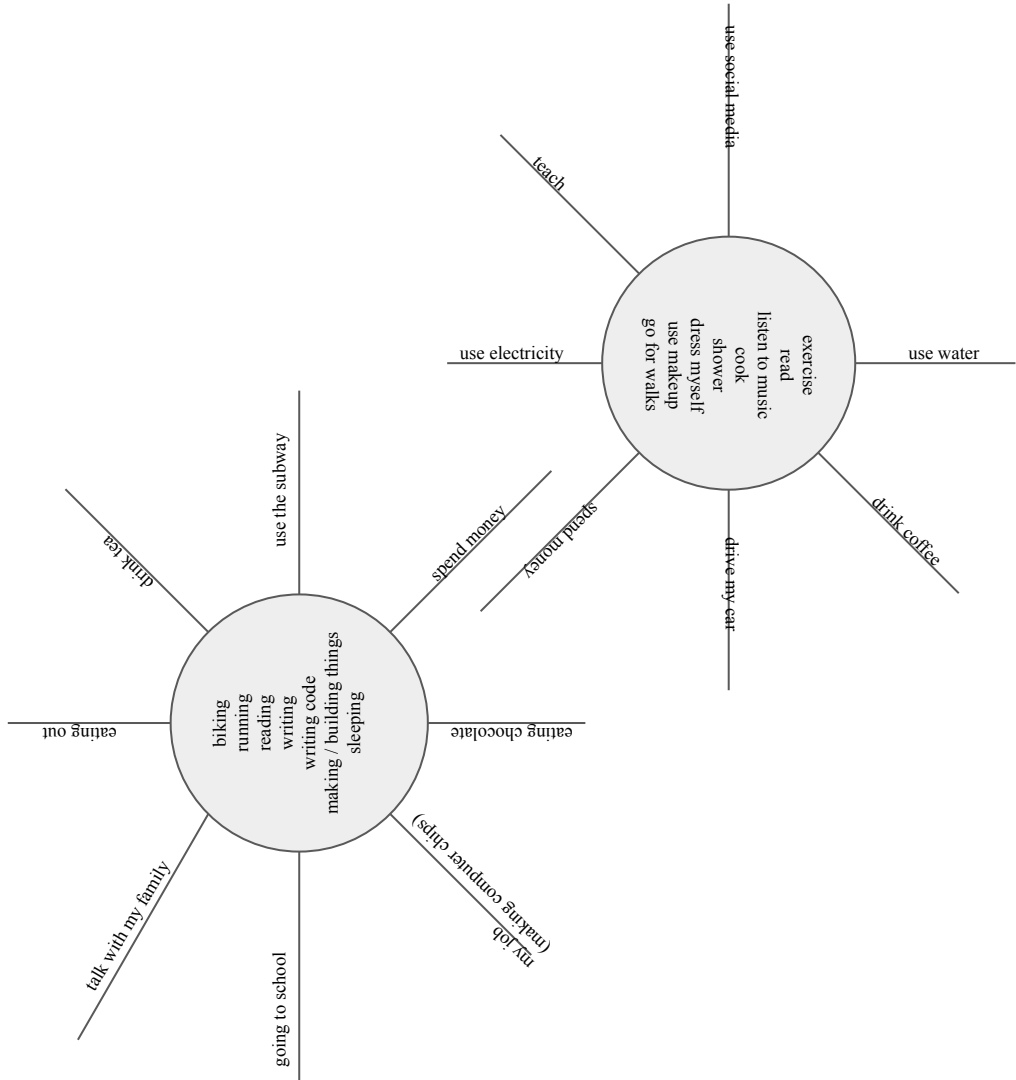
Depending on your answer above - to whatever degree do you believe your existence is external to the natural world - how does your being rest on the persistence and resilience of the natural world?

Islands

1. Pulling from the four readings and perspectives this week **create a reflective list of words or sentences that represent you as an island**. Identify the **actions or parts of your everyday life that are insular and have clear boundaries**. Place a circle around this list.

2. Next, **identify the actions in your life that stretch beyond you, at the community, national or global level**. Place these words or sentences as spokes or paths radiating from your enclosed list.

3. Once everyone has completed their chart, we will come together and see how many of our islands we can connect using the radiating paths.

use water

drink coffee

use social media

drive my car

exercise
read
listen to music
cook
shower
dress myself
use makeup
go for walks

teach

use electricity

spend money

eating out

talk with my family

drink tea

going to school

biking
running
reading
writing
writing code
making / building things
sleeping

use the subway

my job
(making computer chips)

eating chocolate

spend money

use social media

teach

use electricity

use water

exercise
read
listen to music
cook
shower
dress myself
use makeup
go for walks

drink coffee

drive my car

spend money

spend money

use the subway

drink tea

eating out

biking
running
reading
writing
writing code
making / building things
sleeping

eating chocolate

talk with my family

my job
(making computer chips)

going to school

resilience

noun
noun: **resilience**; noun: **resiliency**; plural noun: **resiliencies**

1. the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness.
"the often remarkable resilience of so many British institutions"

2. the ability of a substance or object to spring back into shape;
elasticity.
"nylon is excellent in wearability and resilience"

What does **resilience** mean for the climate and environment as discussed in the context of these readings?

Which aspects of the design processes in the Uros islands and the Marker Wadden project help support resiliency?

stability

noun
plural noun: **stabilities**

1. the state or quality of being stable
2. firmness in position
3. continuance without change; permanence.
4. resistance to change, especially sudden change or deterioration: The stability of the economy encourages investment.
5. steadfastness; constancy, as of character or purpose: The job calls for a great deal of emotional stability.

"Many environmental datasets like precipitation records span 250 years at best, with the majority spanning a much shorter period. From a geological point of view this is an absurdly small slice of time, and one in which the earth's climate has been relatively stable."

- Tega Brain

How do you think the scale of Time in the natural world differs from our own, human perception of Time? How does this influence your idea of stability?

hyperobject

something that is massively distributed in time and space[1]

slow violence

a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, dispersed across time and space[2]

1. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*
2. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*

Do these definitions feel more of less concrete than your own lived experience of climate change?

"I looked online at shots of chromosomes, hydrocarbon data, satellite images. I watched impressions of pure white ice shelves breaking off and floating away. But all those things, like the owls and the Uruguayan fish, seemed to embody a truth which felt conceptual or abstract to me."
-   Daisy Hildyard

How can we, as creative practitioners, help create a sense of immediacy and tangibility in the discussion of climate change and environmental awareness?

Do you consider humans to be part of the natural world? Are you, yourself part of the natural world?

How does your being rest on the persistence and resilience of the natural world?