

Think like a Forest, Act like a Meadow

John Jordan *with an introduction by Ariadna Aston*¹

¹ The 5th AHRA international conference on the topic of Agency was considered at the same time within a research and a pedagogical framework, being integrated as a Theory Forum in the teaching curricula of the M.Arch course. The Theory Forum takes every year different formats including lectures and workshops by invited (or selected) speakers on topics related to theories and histories of architecture and related fields. Previous Theory Forums were looking into issues of Participation, Space, Technologies of Power, Representation, Indeterminacy, Alternate Currents and generated different books and journal publications. At Agency, students were also involved in the organisation of the event, being able to interact with speakers and doctoral researchers from non hierarchical positions. As part of the Theory Forum assessment, they had to write a critical essay which pursued one of the theoretical themes of the conference, discussing how this theme had an impact on their own work and thinking. The present text is an edited version of one of the 5th year essays which relates to John Jordan's paper at Agency.

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² Platform London (2010) <http://www.platformlondon.org/publications.asp> [accessed 7 May 2010].

John Jordan uses art to challenge the current way of thinking by bringing together art and the socialist side of politics. In 1987 he became co-director of the social practice art group 'Platform' combining '... the transformatory power of art with the tangible goals of campaigning, the rigour of in-depth research with the vision to promote alternative futures.'² Jordan then went on to co-found the resistance collective 'Reclaim the Streets'. In 2002 he set up the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA), merging clowning and civil-disobedience. He has written and lectured about the space between art and activism and co-edited the book 'We Are Everywhere: the irresistible rise of global anticapitalism'.³ Jordan now works with Climate Camp, a group of volunteers who are concerned about climate change and how to do something about it for our future. Climate Camp⁴ have organised events where they set up camps near to places that are contributing to climate change e.g. power stations, airports, and run workshops on how to live more sustainable lives.

Making art that was invisible as art, was important... I was sick of doing performances... where I would inevitably end up talking with audiences about definitions of art and why the weird things I was doing in public was in fact art... what I cared about was what it did. Was it successfully transforming society?⁵

This statement from John Jordan's biographical essay reveals how he wants to use art to make a difference to the world. He wrote this essay as a short text with many detailed footnotes. These footnotes make up most of the essay, and are used to refer to authors, activists and events that have made a statement to the world through activism, some of which Jordan has been a part of. This format reflects John Jordan's methods of using an imaginative mechanism to communicate a message. The main text discusses the notion of 'Library Angels' as a story device in which to base moments during his life supplemented by the footnotes. In this sense he uses the idea of the 'Library Angels' as something unexpected in the way

³ John Jordan (2010) 'In the Footnotes of Library Angels: A Bi(bli)ography of Insurrectionary Imagination', http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/resources/Study_Room/guides/John_Jordan_SRG.html [accessed 7 May 2010].

⁴ See Melanie Bax' Article 'The Other Side of the Fence' in this issue of field:

⁵ John Jordan (2010) 'In the Footnotes of Library Angels: A Bi(bli)ography of Insurrectionary Imagination', http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/resources/Study_Room/guides/John_Jordan_SRG.html [accessed 7 May 2010].

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ John Jordan (2005), 'Notes Whilst Walking on 'How to Break the Heart of Empire'', <http://transform.eicpp.net/transversal/1007/jordan/en>

⁹ Climate Camp (2009) <http://climatecamp.org.uk/node/2> [accessed 7 May 2010].

¹⁰ John Jordan (2010) 'In the Footnotes of Library Angels: A Bi(bli)ography of Insurrectionary Imagination', http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/resources/Study_Room/guides/John_Jordan_SRG.html [accessed 7 May 2010].

his art activism uses unexpected notions like the army of clowns to express the message he wants to get across but also to instigate change.

As an artist I've never been happy merely communicating the problems; I don't want to make more images that tell the world about the atrocities of war; I don't want to do a durational performance that points out the destruction of the biosphere; I don't want to make art about issues, but in them, with them. I want an art that is immediate, that is embedded in the issues themselves. An art that directly intervenes and attempts to transform the problem not illustrate it. I don't want to represent things but to change them.⁶

He discusses the way that he looked at activism and how to organise it in the form of 'free parties [rather] than boring marches... training demonstrators to behave like circus clowns rather than dangerous anarchists.'⁷ He also mentions his work with Reclaim the Streets, where 10,000 people took to the streets of the City in London to create a 'Carnival Against Capital' in 1999. The City became 'filled with the hum of profit and plunder and that for a few hours on that historic day was echoing with the sounds of subversive play and leisure'.⁸ This event, like the rest of Jordan's work, uses something surprising to encourage a transformation by demonstrating how different a place can be, how differently society can work. His work with Climate Camp attempts to prove how people can live without damaging the environment. In 2006 the group set up a camp in a field next to Drax, a coal-fired power station in West Yorkshire 'for ten days of learning and sustainable living, which culminated in a day of mass action against the power station. Our aim was to kick-start a social movement to tackle climate change'.⁹ Their camp demonstrated how people can live without burning fossil fuels in an attempt to stimulate change. The group is made up of a people with diverse backgrounds and professions learning by doing and through participating together. Consensus decision making is a fundamental part of this group, where each individual takes part in every decision. The group works together as a single unit. This notion may sound difficult to implement but when it works it can help to make every person feel important in the work that the group does. John Jordan believes that working together in this sense can be beneficial:

While Activists have the monopoly on social transformation, artists have the monopoly on creativity, both roles continue the unhealthy division of labour and specialism that our culture requires to separate people from each other and to stop us being self reliant.¹⁰

Think Like a Forest, Act Like a Meadow

Like lovers carve their names on trees, the earliest books were engraved on beech bark, hence the origins of the word 'book'- 'boc' meaning 'beech tree'.

Under the canopy of an ancient Athenian olive grove, home to Plato's academy, Phaedrus asked Socrates why he never ventured beyond the city walls into the countryside. 'I'm a lover of learning' Socrates answered, 'trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in the town will.' The grove was later chopped down to make siege machines.

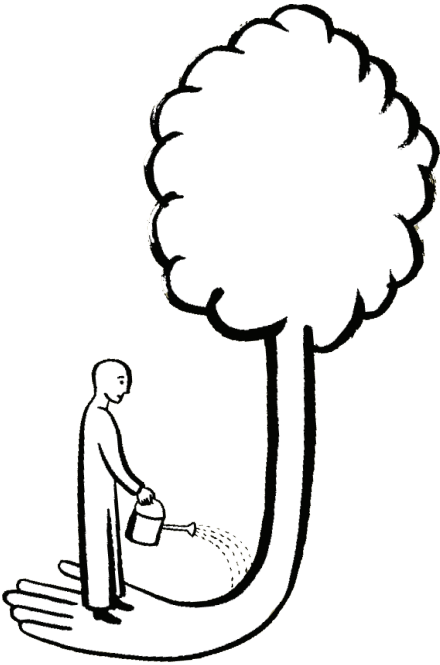
The soundtrack of western 'civilisation' is the noise of the book of nature being slammed shut and the rumble of war machines approaching. We are told that Nature is mute, it has nothing to teach us, except that it is a battlefield of all against all. But as the war against our climate and ecosystems tips the physiology of the planet into chaos, the myth that Nature is just 'red in tooth and claw', is unravelling.

The more we study the living world the more we come to realise that the tendency is actually to associate, build relationships, and cooperate. From trees that work with fungi to share sugars and information between themselves to bees pollinating flowers, nature abounds with reciprocity. The fittest are in fact those that relate the best. Perhaps it's no surprise that a culture that rewards greed and domination would rather we forget the true lessons of the natural world.

Permaculture

Permaculture is an ecological design system whose central tenet is that by observing the way ecosystems such as a forest or meadow work, we can learn to build human habitats that are energy efficient, resilient, waste free and productive. Described by some as 'the art of creating beneficial relationships' and by others as 'the science of connections', Permaculture merges traditional wisdom with contemporary ecological research. The idea of mimicking the patterns of natural systems can be applied to everything from planting edible landscapes to the way a performance is designed, from organising an act of creative resistance to putting on a wild party.

Neoliberal economist Milton Friedman, one of the architects of the collapse once said: 'Only a crisis produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.' Permaculture is one of the many post-capitalist ideas emerging from the margins: it's a revolution disguised as gardening. At the heart of Permaculture are four interdependent ethics that frame a set of attitudes and principles, each of which encapsulates the complex wisdom of



ecosystem design. What you have in your hands is a set of 13 of these, it's a tool box of common sense, use it as wisely as a forest would.

Observe, Connect and Interact

Perhaps we are allowing the world to be wrecked not because we are evil or stupid, but simply because in our haste we no longer notice that we are part of it. In this society of speed, nature is the thing out there that flashes past our windshield; something alien and separate which needs saving, but that we don't have time to spend time with.

Some permaculture projects spend a year observing a site or system before acting on it. When we surrender to slowness our world begins to unfold, it unveils its extraordinary patterns; the more we know it, the more it becomes part of us. When an artist creates a form, the material dictates the outcome as much as her own creative input; it is a feedback between clay and hands, camera and subject, stone and chisel. The better she knows her material the more it yields to her creativity. The deepest root of art and permaculture is simply paying attention.

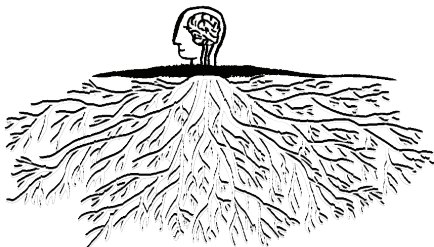
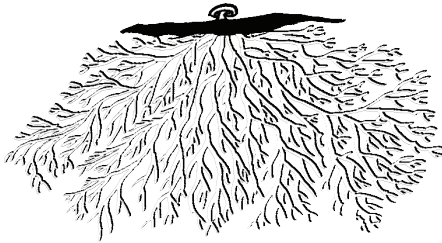
Understand and Apply Nature's Patterns

We will never fully fathom the depths of nature's wonders: how a salmon navigates thousands of kilometres across an ocean, how an acorn becomes an oak tree, how a flock of birds moves without leaders. But by understanding its patterns we discover wisdoms that have evolved over millennia and design solutions that our super computers could never find.

From snail shells to stellar galaxies, sunflowers to tornados, spider webs to the DNA in every cell of life, the spiral is a recurring pattern in nature. Water pulses and flows in spirals (watch it going down the plughole), yet our culture ignores its patterns, puts it into canals and waste pipes, encloses it behind levees and dams. Water always wants to meander, it hates straight lines. Ignoring this can have devastating consequences; if nature's patterns had been applied to the building of New Orleans there would have been no levees to break.

The Problem is the Solution

When faced with a problem we tend to freeze and focus on the obstacle, losing sight of any possible solutions. A simple trick is to shift our perspective and begin to see the source of a solution within the problem itself. Bill Mollison, permaculture's co-founder, famously said: 'You don't have a slug problem, you have a duck deficiency.' Increase the amount of ducks and they get free food in the form of slugs, you get free eggs and fertiliser, and no more slugs.



Instead of treating the 45 million car tyres discarded in the UK every year as waste, we could see them as free building materials. With 2000 tyres and less than £40,000 you can build an 'earthship', an off grid passive solar home with its own sewage and water collection (no more bills) and simultaneously reduce the waste mountain. A problem is simply when something is out of balance; it's a feedback signal to remind us that change is due.



Design from the Whole to the Particular, from Pattern to Detail

The proverb 'can't see the forest for the trees' sums up a capitalist culture that has dissected and blown everything to smithereens, studying the minutiae of life yet understanding so little about its patterns and interconnections. Quantum physics dramatically showed us that there are no discrete parts, just patterns in an inseparable web of relationships. Sometimes the closer we look the harder it is to understand the whole.

Before taking action on the detail we should take a step back and observe the bigger picture. It is only then that we observe how the specifics of a system connect and interact, what the shape of edges and overlaps are, and what the inherent cycles and patterns reveal. The human species is hardwired to spot patterns; we were born 'network thinkers'. We must stop treating the world as a collection of isolated objects and individuals and start looking for the rich patterns and relationships that life is made of.



Least Change for Greatest Effect

Permaculture aims to reduce all energy use, whether human muscle or fossil fuel. Why build new power stations to heat homes, when we could site houses to capture and store passive solar energy? Why organise a mass action against an oil company HQ when a small affinity group blocking a pipeline could affect their profits more? Instead of planting new orchards why not graft onto already existing wild trees? Instead of draining a pond to grow crops, we could plant willows to coppice and waterchestnuts to eat. It's all about finding the leverage point in a system and intervening there, where the least work accomplishes the most. As the Dalai Lama said: 'If you think you are too small to make a difference, try sleeping with a mosquito.'

Seek, Use and Encourage Diversity

Browse the shelves of a supermarket and you will find at best four types of apples, mostly shipped thousands of miles. Yet the UK once produced more than 6000 different species, ones for every season and taste, many with such succulent names as Laxton's Fortune with a hint of aniseed,



pineapple tasting Claygate Pearmain, the huge sweet Peasgood's Nonsuch and Colonel Vaughan for perfect autumn cider.

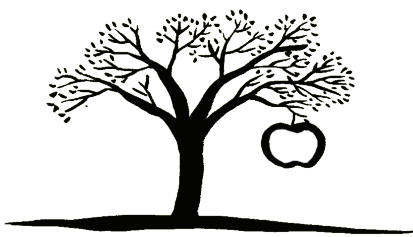
We tend to measure diversity by the amount of differences present in a system, yet what makes ecosystems so efficient and resilient is not the quantity of species but the number of beneficial relationships between them. One way permaculture uses diversity is through Polyculture: growing a community of plants together that benefit and support each other. Some plants protect others from pests, some fix nitrogen in the soil, others encourage things to taste better. With some forest gardens boasting more than 500 useful species, it's a far cry from the fragile monoculture of a wheat field.



Use Edges and Value the Marginal

The point where a forest meets meadowland, or the sea slaps against the shore is the most dynamic parts of an ecosystem. It's in those slithers of space that a multitude of different species coexist, and the engine of evolution moves fastest.

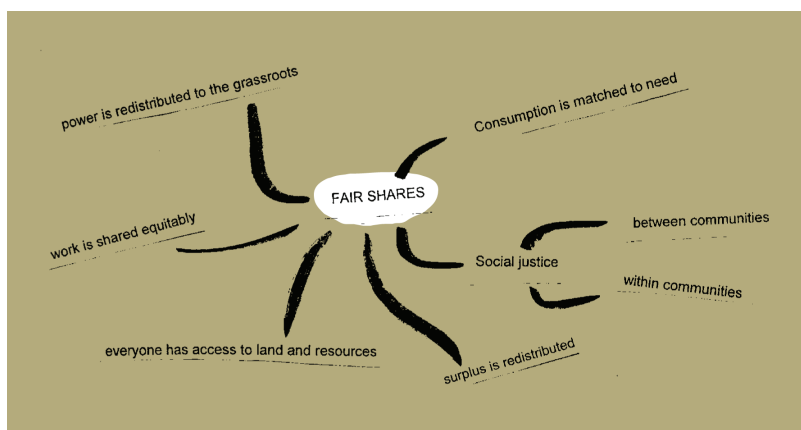
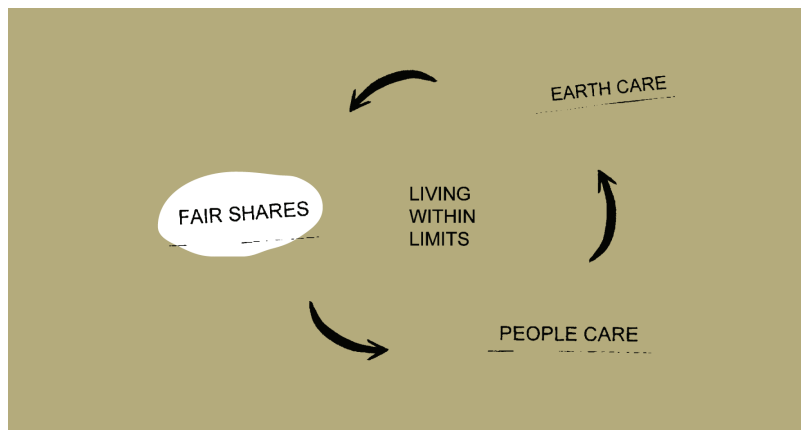
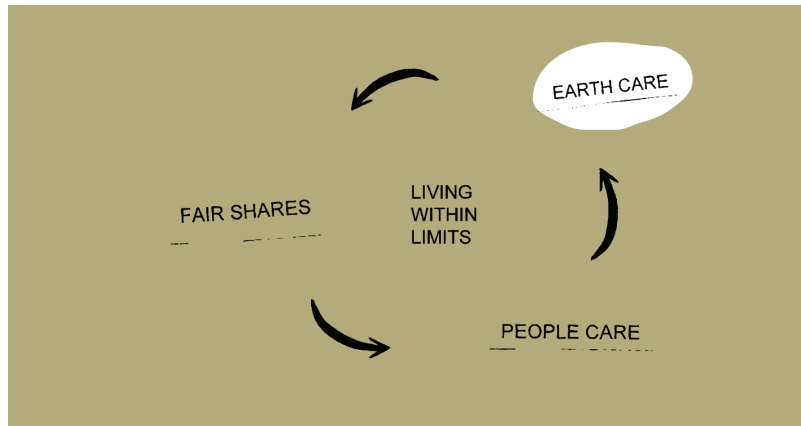
Nearly everything we take for granted in society began as an experiment on the margins. From the idea of universal suffrage to the implementation of the weekend, from the science of climate change to the abolition of slavery, from workers' rights to organic agriculture, yesterday's marginal and impossible eventually becomes today's normal. There has never been a better time to desert the centre and multiply the edges, the greatest creativity and change has always taken place there, and it's from the edge that we can jump and fly.

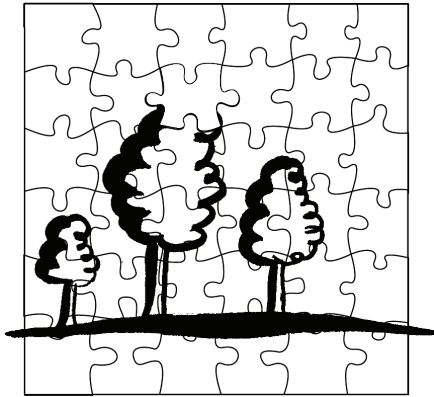
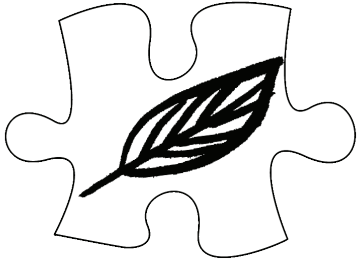


Each Important Function Supported by Many Elements

A million people died during the Irish potato famine; blight wiped out the potato crop, only one variety was grown and it was the staple food for a third of the population. Ireland's other crops continued to be exported and British troops made sure the trade didn't stop: making money was more important than feeding the Irish. Similarly, the global economy is entirely dependent on cheap oil, as it becomes scarce and its price rises, a serious systemic crisis looms. In a healthy system however, nothing is indispensable, everything has several back ups.

We can see this working in horizontal protest movements surviving state repression, because they don't have executive committees to infiltrate or leaders to assassinate. We experience it during a recession, when those with multiple skills weather out redundancy better than the specialists.





Each Element Has Many Functions

I'm writing this sitting on an old wooden church chair which has a pocket built into the back for holding prayer books (in my case it's become a pencil store). It's a simple illustration of 'stacking functions'. In permaculture we try to give every element of a design at least three functions. If a tree is planted it can also provide shade for outside dining, fruit for dessert, leaf fall to fertilise the crops underneath it, roots for preventing erosion and raising the water table.

Multitasking reduces waste and work. When The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination toured the country leading up to the G8 protests, we made a program for the performance in the shape of a large heart with information and images printed on. The design allowed for multiple transformations by the audience during the show's 'lessons in radical origami': first into a dunce hat, then a loudhailer and finally a cornet for holding the delicious free chips distributed during the interval.

Obtain a Yield

A businessman is walking along a beach. He comes upon a group of fishermen lying in the midday sun chatting. 'Why aren't you working?' he asks. 'We've finished for the day' they reply joyfully. 'We have enough fish for our friends and families'.

'But if you fished all day you could make so much more money' the business man scoffs.

'But what would that bring?' they ask.

'Well, then you could buy bigger boats and nets' sighs the businessman.

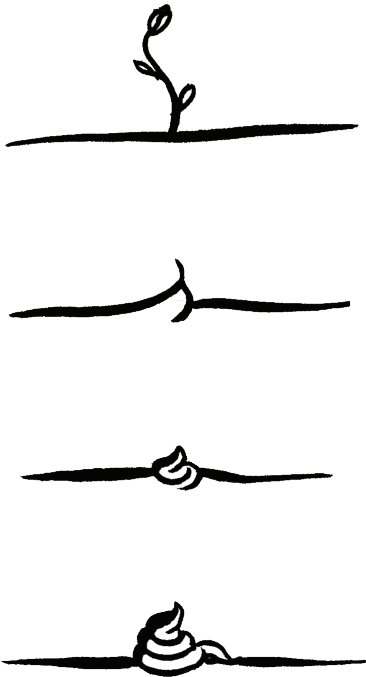
'And what would that give us?'

'More fish and more money to invest in things like sonar and employ others to do the work for you' continues the bemused businessman.

'And then what?' ask the fishermen.

'Well then you will never have to work again in your life and like me you will be able to lounge about in the sun without any cares in the world.'

The fishermen burst into laughter: 'But that's exactly what we're doing!'



Produce No Waste

Shitting in clean water is one of 'civilisation's' many stupid ideas. In nature one system's waste is another's resource. Our shit creates rich compost and one of its roles is to return potassium to the soil, a nutrient key to plant growth. The fact that our shit is flushed into our rivers and seas has meant that levels of potassium in the soil are becoming critically scarce. With each flush we waste 10 litres of fresh water and require huge amounts of electricity to run sewage plants. As a result our waterways become suffocated with nutrients and our climate overburdened with more needlessly emitted CO₂. What a waste!

A humble solution is the compost loo. Cheap and simple to build they are a step towards a zero waste culture. Shit falls into sawdust, there is no smell and no fouled drinking water. A year later it turns to 'humanure', which can be applied to fruit trees and bushes, not only reducing the need for fossil fuel based fertilisers, but reconnecting our bodies to the fertility cycle.

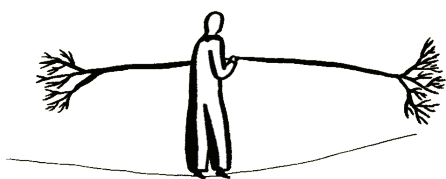
Start Small and Learn from Change

In the winter of 1983, a handful of activists escape the city and brave the jungle aiming to 'convince' the impoverished mayan peasants of south eastern Mexico that together they can start a revolution. The Chiapan Indians laugh, the activists stop in their tracks and listen. They continue listening for 11 years and their ideas of revolution change.

Then on New Year's day 1994, as the North American Free Trade Agreement is due to come into force, several thousand masked rebels creep out of the rainforest, take over seven towns and declare war. Twenty four hours later they retreat back to the mountains where they build self managed autonomous municipalities and send out communiqués mixing poetry and propaganda. A new politics is born and the 'antiglobalisation' movement blossoms. The Zapatistas as they call themselves don't want to take over state power but 'construct power' from below, they call for 'one world made of many worlds', a multitude of rebellions locally specific yet globally interconnected. Starting small isn't just beautiful, it can be unimaginably successful when we learn from our mistakes and take one step at a time.

Apply Self Regulation and Accept Feedback

Every living thing self regulates: when we get hot, we sweat and cool down, ecosystems such as meadows aren't mowed or covered in pesticides, they look after themselves. Even the planet works as a self regulating organism by keeping the atmosphere's temperature compatible to life through the complex chemical and physical interaction of plants, minerals, animals,





13 Attitudes (Card Set). Photo: John Jordan.

fungi and micro organisms. This equilibrium only faltered when we violently intervened by burning fossil fuels. A healthy system requires minimum outside intervention and is constantly monitoring itself for imbalances, mistakes become signposts, feedback is fundamental. In permaculture it is not a project but a system that one designs, and the implemented design is simply a moment of stillness in a system that is forever in motion. Observation never stops, the better the observation, the more responsive we are to the feedback and so know which changes will make a system more self managed and resilient. An efficient system needs less work or inputs from us, except observation, which brings us back to the very beginning - observe, connect, interact – after all it's just a question of paying attention.

Further Steps

<http://www.permaculture.org.uk>
<http://www.permacultureactivist.net>
<http://www.permacultureprinciples.com>
<http://www.climatecamp.org.uk>
<http://www.earthactivisttraining.org>
<http://www.journalofaestheticsandprotest.org>



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