

Doing 'Doin' Dirt Time'

Fern:

Dirt time is time spent following trails or tracks in the earth - of animals, leaves or the wind. Doin' Dirt Time is the art and practice of following and making sense of these tracks. It is also the title of an interview conducted by the American art critic Suzi Gablik with two visionary sculptors, Rachel Dutton and Rob Olds, more than twenty years ago. I came across the interview in Gablik's book, 'Conversations Before the End of Time' in 2013. It contains interviews with artists, activists, critics and spiritual teachers. Gablik, inspired by 'the art of dialogue', uses the form to speak about the role of artists at a time of ecological collapse. She is in accordance with some of the people she speaks to while others have wildly different convictions and claims. Gablik does not attempt to impose her own point of view, but to open up a space for real listening, a meeting place, a place for total respect for the viewpoint of 'the other'.

Doin' Dirt Time is the second interview in the book. It describes how the two sculptors decided to stop making their work, to give their art and their possessions away and to live their life *as* an art - not *for* their art. It is provocative stuff and raises many questions that have only become more potent with the passage of time. I am an artist, a theatre practitioner - or was, when I read the book - part of Volcano Theatre an international touring company that I co-founded some 25 years ago. I read Doin' Dirt Time first on a train between London and my home town of Swansea. By the time I arrived I had a desire to restage the interview and to present it as 'art' - as a new invitation for dialogue.

At the time of reading the interview, I had been struggling with the question Gablik raises with Dutton and Olds concerning the role of artists at a time of ecological crisis. I had recently been involved in developing a collaborative arts and sustainability initiative in Wales called Emergence that advocates 'creative practice for a sustainable future'. This began when I took a year sabbatical and was inspired by the many concepts, teachers, and artists I encountered, for example the work of Margaret Wheatley, Joanna Macy, Fritjov Capra and Satish Kumar. Emergence creates opportunities and space for deep dialogue concerning the 'art of living well within the ecological limits of a finite planet' (Tim Jackson).

Inspired by these new ideas, the 25th anniversary of my theatre company gave me an opportunity to commission a number of pieces from past and existing members as well as create something myself. I wanted to put into the mix a simple performance that questioned the very nature of art and theatre and provoked discussion around these themes. This was the context in which Doin' Dirt Time was first performed in February 2013. I did not know it then but it was the start of a big change in my own life.

Philip:

I don't like change. As I get older, I come to think that the great challenge life presents is to learn to accept change as a gift and not a curse. When Fern first read the interview to me on a car journey my immediate reaction was the same as many peoples when they see us perform it: "Who are these crazy people? And

what on earth possessed them to do what they did?" But I love Fern and her restless need for change – no matter how uncomfortable it makes me - and when she suggested that we create a performance piece from the interview, I readily agreed. After all, it would require no rehearsal or thinking time...

Fern suggested we use a verbatim theatre technique in which actors are presented with individual recordings of interviews on MP3 players, which they listen to and speak simultaneously along with. It's reminiscent of the old, annoying child's game of speaking at the same time as someone else. Using this technique would enable us to offer the conversation between Gablik, Dutton and Olds as if it were happening right there in front of people. It would also allow us to work with a new 'Suzi' for every performance since no rehearsal was required. Across seven nights at Volcano's space in Swansea in the spring of 2013 – 21 years after the original conversation took place – the words of Doin' Dirt Time came to life once more. Like Fern, I had no idea that this simple performance piece would change my life...

The initial seven performances were fascinating – both in the process but also in the reactions of our audiences. There was an interest in the means of performance, but more than that a deep need to explore and chew over what Rob and Rachel were saying. They speak about their fears for the imminent end of the dominant way of life we humans lead on this planet; they speak of their fervent wish to "live their daily life as a prayer" and to be "separated from the separation"; they speak of their hope that they can learn the skills of tracking and awareness that will enable them to directly engage with nature as a way of life not simply as a leisure activity. Right from the beginning there was conflict and dissent related to what they said – "What good does it do to just 'drop out'?" "It was easy for them – they had no children, no responsibilities and they could afford to do it!" - but there was also a fervent understanding of their very real concerns about the direction we are still taking and, underneath it all, perhaps a desire to emulate them.

But by far and away the most common question we were asked as we offered Dutton and Olds' words up, night after night, was – "What happened to them?" At that stage, the only references to Rob and Rachel we had found were related to the interview and Gablik's book. It truly seemed that they had succeeded in their quest to go 'off grid' and disappear completely. And then we found their website...

Fern:

Following the initial presentations synchronicity and serendipity played their role, and we were invited to present the piece in many different settings always as a means of furthering conversations and dialogue, and always for free. We were a month away from taking it to the Uncivilisation Festival when a former 'Suzi' told us that she had seen a comment from Rachel and Rob on an academic article on the internet. This led us to their website which we immediately trawled for clues as to what had happened to them. The site mentioned that they had written a book - 'Water Drawn Before Sunrise' - which appeared to be a joint autobiography. We felt as if we were now tracking Rachel and Rob just as they

had learnt to track foxes and deer in North America with their teacher, Tom Brown Jr. We ordered the book and began to read. The lives of these two visionary artists became more real to us with each turn of the page. The book was written as a dialogue, one writing a chapter, the other picking up where the other left off. The book revealed the story of their lives from their childhoods, development as artists, their individual successes, spiritual seeking and finally their meeting, shared concerns and calling. As we read the book we had a growing sense of who these people were and the deep thinking behind their radical choices and the impact their decision to 'disappear' had on the rest of their lives. Phil and I had a shared and inexplicable sensation that by reading their words we were starting to come into direct dialogue with Rachel and Rob...

Philip:

At event after event, in widely disparate locations and settings, Fern and I 'became' Rachel and Rob. We shared their words, their concerns, their fears and their profound longings. We began to look at our own lives and the choices we were making through the prism of Rachel and Rob's words. At the same time, we read the story of their nine year long retreat. Their decision to return to the world to share their vision became for us a profound inspiration and meditation – not necessarily to directly emulate them but rather to let their visions lead us to make different choices in our own lives. This created the simple desire to be with our fellow humans, animals and plants on this planet we call home at this time of change and collapse; to sit with compassion and empathy for ourselves and for all life – and to know that there is no separation between us.

As we became aware of this shift, and as more and more people asked us what had happened to Rob and Rachel, it became more and more obvious to us that we had to contact them. We had already contacted Suzi Gablik and gained her permission to reproduce the interview. But now, we had to go to the source – to the people whose words and lives had so inspired us. We wrote a long joint email to them both – sharing our journey and asking for their permission to continue...

Fern

We sent the email with a mixture of trepidation and excitement. It was a relief to finally be making contact. I also had a sense of a completion of something. I felt we could no longer continue to offer this performance without the permission of the two subjects of the original interview. It had increasingly felt that we were calling upon Rachel and Rob, inviting them into the room in some way - we now had to give them a conscious choice as to whether we should stop or continue to offer it in future.

It was no time at all before we received a reply. We could not have wished for anything better. Their joy at us seeking them out and their generous and enthusiastic response validated our decision to contact them in the first place. We were now in real connection, real dialogue with Rachel Dutton and Rob Olds - these people who had inspired us so much. Although the response came via email, the message felt like it had dropped into my inbox from another planet and another time.

Philip

The words sent to us from Rachel and Rob are profoundly moving in their generosity and openness. They tell us of how moved they are to hear of what we're doing and that they are happy for us to continue. And so we do. But we also now have their own words of love, connection and compassion and a real sense that their journey is our journey and that both are continuing.

We continue to offer Doin' Dirt Time freely wherever we are invited. It has become part of our lives and so have Rob and Rachel. And, like them, we continue to change, grow and face the challenges of life. Doin' Dirt Time brings us into contact with new people across the country, all of whom are questioning, seeking and tracking a new way of living, a new way of being present as a human being.

In 2014, we performed Doin' Dirt Time at the Resurgence Summer Gathering and another part of the circle was completed. There before us was Satish Kumar, who was also interviewed by Suzi Gablik for the same book twenty years ago. The power and energy of words, thoughts, ideas and, above all, connections, becomes clearer and clearer as we move forwards with this offering. It is an invitation and a challenge, a gift and a blessing. One day we hope against hope to be able to meet Rob and Rachel in person and share our stories. But, even if that never happens, we know that we will always be connected to them through our hearts and that no words spoken from the heart are ever lost in time...

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