

# On striving to remain an amateur



Artist Katherine Ball discusses biological disobedience, apprenticing with nature, being an ecosystem, and remaining curious as well as optimistic.

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As told to Grashina Gabelmann, 1348 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Activism](#), [Inspiration](#), [Education](#), [Independence](#).

**You self-describe as apprenticing with nature. I find that so beautiful. Can you elaborate?**

So, actually, that came from John Jordan and Isabelle Fremeaux of the Lab of Insurrectionary Imagination, this idea of apprenticing to nature. In 2012, they invited me to be a part of a theater performance called *What is Enough?* in Hamburg. The play was about Luddites. There's this term, "You're being a Luddite" usually used if somebody avoids technology. It comes from a radical section of 19th Century English textile workers who smashed machines in factories. They were worried that machines were going to take their jobs, which kind of came true. The storyline of the play was that the Luddites had been hiding in secrecy for the last few hundred years. And now, they were having sort of a coming-out party. And then, for that period of time, their new phrase was, "Only people who have done an apprenticeship with nature can be trusted with machines." Technology can be used to destroy nature or it can be used to work with it. It depends on the intentions that you have, and I think these deep, deep intentions come from having a relationship with the more-than-human world. Paul Kingsnorth also talks a bit about this. He has an essay called, *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist*. It's a really good critique of the environmental movement. One big problem he defines is that people have no relationship with this place, like "the environment" or nature. Even just the word is very distancing.

**What's your relationship to environmentalism?**

For a long time, I was really involved with making art for different protests related to climate change. This is when I was making inflatable sculptures with [Tools for Action](#). I spent a whole summer in New York working with different community groups and giant pieces of plastic and tape. We then had this big march with around 350,000. The front of the march reached the end of the march, before the end of the march started moving.

**Oh my god.**

Yeah but it was just totally a human-centric experience. And I feel like it's really easy to say you're an environmentalist. So, since that experience and working on the play I thought that if I'm going to try and be an advocate for the more-than-human world or for the wild world, or however you want to phrase that, then I need to have a relationship with it, and be in connection with it. And that's one of the reasons that I go and spend time in Hawaii now, because I can spend hours in the ocean every day, or go and be in the forest and just be surrounded by all of these different plants and microorganisms.

**Has that influenced the way in which you think about your work?**

I'm thinking more about how my future artwork could be about helping people develop a deeper connection with

nature. I'm having this happen at Floating University, where I'm making water filtration systems, but I know that technology is not the complete answer to our challenges with water. What's missing is our relationship with water, and so I've been creating water rituals with the concept of, "Can we develop a deeper relationship with water?" So this summer, I will organize a movement program that's trying to help people reconnect with their bodies. I think, actually, it's a bit different than what I envision now because of Covid-19, but essentially the idea is for us to understand or to take as a starting point that our bodies are the most intimate ecosystems that we know, and also to think about this ecosystem that's at the site at Floating University, and to have some sort of dialogue between the ecosystems inside of us and the wetland ecosystem that's present there.

More recently, I've been thinking about how you pattern your life. And I think about how you pattern your life and how you pattern your body. It came from me learning how to do a handstand. You want to pattern your body with this hollow body shape in your body.

**Can you tell me more about these acts of bio-disobedience you've mentioned?**

So, one of the texts that was the inspiration for *What is Enough?* was by the Critical Art Ensemble which is called *Fuzzy Biological Sabotage*. And out of this term, "biological sabotage," this idea of biological disobedience arose. To me, biological disobedience is the biological counterpart to civil disobedience. And if you think about civil disobedience as being something like Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on the bus then biological disobedience could be something like these ants that infest electronics and short circuit them, or tree roots breaking sidewalks apart, mushrooms growing through roads, termites decomposing wooden buildings, or pigweed being resistant to Monsanto's herbicide Roundup.

**That's badass.**

Yeah and and I think it goes back to this language around composting these elements of human civilization that are really hegemonic, that it's just the only way, and there's no room for other species to have agency.

**And how do you work with bio-disobedience?**

I built this garden in Austria that was supposed to be a garden of biological disobedience, or fuzzy biological sabotagery. And the idea there was to create a nursery where these different species were growing so other people could do experiments with them. I think a lot of my work is hearing about some sort of possible solution, theory or intervention and actually trying to make it happen.

**Do you think fuzzy biological sabotage is a way that humans can align with nature to create a form of sabotage on human civilization?**

I think so though species are able to do it without human guidance or control like this type of bacteria that can corrode oil pipelines.

**You see yourself as a habitat for fungi and bacteria located on Planet Earth.**

I conceive of myself as an ecosystem. I use the pronoun "they" in my bio. I'm interested in using that pronoun because I like this idea of really recognizing that there are more microorganisms living in our bodies than there are of us. And the body is an ecosystem. I think somehow, there's another self, more "us" than "I." And I think if the "I" can keep that in mind, then maybe one can approach life in a different way.

**And also, "they," the multitude of what is in us, takes care of us, and we also have to take care of them.**

Yeah, totally.

**But at the same time "they" are us. It is us...**

Totally. They live in our cells. They help produce our cells. Without them, we couldn't make our cells.

**I can identify with you calling yourself an amateur. It's a term I've been thinking about.**

This is also really important. I realized that I was totally a victim of this concept of professionalism, as I think many people are. We had a guest lecturer at university and he said that he never strives to be a professional but an amateur in the best sense of the word and when I heard that, something just clicked.

**Yeah, I can really relate to it, because I've also felt bad for feeling that I'm not an expert in anything. I've recently started coming to terms with it and the etymology of the word "amateur," has helped. It comes from, "one who loves."**

Oh wow, I didn't know. Yeah, I think it's important to be excited about what you do, finding people who know more than you, asking questions and being curious as well as optimistic.

**Katherine Ball Recommends:**

Take some time to be outside

[Richard Houquez](#)

[Handstand flip](#)

Some scientists are talking about spreading rocks on the earth to avoid runaway climate change. Lectures [on enhanced silicate weathering](#) and here is one [on geoengineering](#).

["We are an image from the future"](#)

[Name](#)

Katherine Ball

[Vocation](#)

Artist

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