

Ben Lotan and Tara Shi on creating a new community



August 18, 2017 - *This Will Take Time* is a non-profit organization founded in 2015 by designer/organizer Tara Shi and artist/scientist/designer Benjamin Lotan. Dedicated to long-term projects and located in Point Arena, CA, *TWTT* is home to an artist residency program, a yearly arts & digital culture festival called *World Wide West*, and [a lot of trees](#). Here Shi and Lotan describe how they built *TWTT* as an evolution of their art/design practices, how they use spreadsheets in all the wrong (but best) ways, and why collaborating is the best way to bring new ideas and communities to life.

As told to Willa Kœrner, 1940 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Beginnings](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#), [Independence](#).

***This Will Take Time* is an organization and artist residency in Point Arena, CA dedicated to long-term projects. Can you talk about how it came to be?**

Tara: We've been working on *This Will Take Time* for two years now, and recently moved from the Bay Area to Point Arena full-time. I see building this project as an evolution and continuation of an art and design practice. Before this, both of us were in the Bay Area, collaborating on a company called Social Print Studio.

Ben: Social Print Studio is a photo-printing company that started as a performative thesis project for my MFA at UC San Diego. The attempt was to make a real, functioning company—a real business. We were lucky to actually make that happen.

Tara: *This Will Take Time* was actually born within Social Print Studio. We established a mini artist residency there, which eventually became larger and started seeming weird to cram within Social Print Studio's business goals. Doing something that was land-based and on a completely different scale felt like an exciting new challenge. So we just began looking for spaces that potentially could host the project.



Tube spinning ritual in field A, Tara Shi and Liat Berdugo

It's not so simple to buy land, move, and launch a completely new venture. How did you decide this was the thing you wanted to focus on?

Ben: Even though there's a lot of commitment that went into it—with purchasing land and moving up here—it felt like an open commitment. We felt like, "Let's just try this and learn from it. If it's not the right thing, we'll find a way to change it." But as Tara mentioned, we were interested in pursuing something that was lasting, where we could work on projects that span the next decade or 20 years. And that just didn't seem possible in an urban setting, based on the price of owning land or owning something for the long term.

Tara: We started asking ourselves, "What would it mean to pursue alternative ways of making projects or building community beyond the urban formula?" Early on, we made a conceptual matrix. It was really just a spreadsheet, but it was a place for us to collect ideas, look at organizations that inspire us, and try to find what was at the core of this project. In

the end, a key concept within the matrix was the idea that "this will take time." Understanding that everything we're doing is process-based is what has led us to this point. Almost every activity that's gone on here since has been about following instincts—like digging, or germinating trees until we have thousands of them—and not being overwhelmed by the need to have an end goal.

It's interesting that you have this organic, endlessly evolving project, and it all came out of a spreadsheet. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Tara: We should show your our spreadsheet, because it's not your classic, organized spreadsheet. It's more of a dumping ground. Things are copied and pasted, and some sheets just have giant chunks of text in them.

Ben: As opposed to how it's used in the business world, the spreadsheet is actually a super flexible tool. It's like an infinite notepad where you can link cells to subsequent sheets and zoom in and out infinitely.

Tara: There's something about using the tool kind of wrong that's kind of fun.



Lower entrance to *This Will Take Time* at Windy Hollow.

Are there other tactics that you've found to be effective for moving your ideas and projects forward?

Ben: Reaching out to people that we find interesting, or who we could learn from. And having a lot of different conversations with a lot of people. Conversations can turn into collaborations, which in turn become long-term relationships. With everybody we work with, we try to be enablers. We're so curious to learn about other people's visions and desires. When we establish collaborations, it's always from the perspective of, "How can we help? What can we do that could contribute to your project?"

I know you're only a couple years into *This Will Take Time*, but what's been the biggest challenge of the project so far?

Tara: Trying to do everything. There are infinite things that need attention and maintenance and care, so we really need to prioritize. It's like, "Okay, we really need electricity in the barn, so that's something we have to focus on. Don't even think about the tomatoes that need to get transplanted." In building this project, there's also this divide between physical energy and mental energy. Like right now, we have to make sure we don't work for 10 hours straight on building the barn door, because we also need to answer emails for two hours. We definitely haven't quite struck the perfect pace yet.

Ben: Yeah, so many projects can feel infinite. Anything that we start doing can turn into something that takes all year. We're building a barn door right now, and we bought the wood to start the project months ago. We have the door built, but there's always one more thing, like, "Well, we need a handle for it." And then it's like, "Well, which type of handle? Are we just gonna buy a metal handle or should we hold out for the day when we can fabricate a nice wooden handle ourselves?" That's why we're always coming back to our name, "This Will Take Time." It's a mantra, reminding us not to get too anxious or worry too much.



Planting the Encoded Forest, *World Wide West Summit*, Summer 2016 (Wifi password encoded in tree binary)

I love that your whole framework for the project is about being honest with yourselves that everything takes forever.

Ben: Yeah. Things never end up going where you think they're going at the beginning. But if you just keep going, you'll end up somewhere. Another difficulty we've had is related to that. With *This Will Take Time*, there's often a feeling like, "Are we doing it wrong?" If we had an end goal, we'd know once we accomplished it. But because we don't have an outcome-oriented vision, it's hard to know what to work on.

My next question is practical. How are you funding this?

Ben: It's a mix. The residency is mostly funded by one corporate sponsor, which just so happens to be Social Print Studio. And then a lot of other expenses we pay out of pocket. We both work to support the project and ourselves. Tara was just a high school math teacher for a semester.

Do you have a vision for a future where you could create a money-earning business model within *This Will Take Time*, or do you think that it's important to keep the project separate from that?

Tara: Definitely. I think that's part of the grand vision of having this place be sustainable. Lately, we've been really obsessed with trees. And so we learned how to germinate trees from our neighbor and got in touch with a redwood forest foundation and did a big planting with them. Right now, we're slowly building out a conifer nursery. The idea is that tree sales from the nursery would go into supporting artists, and the artists would also have some sort of relationship with maintaining the trees. That would be a nice little ecosystem. We like redwood trees and that idea fits very nicely with things that take time.

Ben: We have a lot of other ideas like that. I do think that it's important for us to figure out how to make this project more financially viable. But... this will take time.

Tara: One other thing we're trying to figure out involves the big need for affordable housing here in Point Arena. Now that I'm directly connected to the high school, I've also learned that they're having a really hard time finding teachers. So potentially, one program we're exploring could be affordable housing for teachers. So, things like that will all become more projects.



Hole A. Single person dig. 11 feet deep. First hole dug on the property. Field A.

What have been the most important resources for getting this project going? Do you have any words of wisdom for people who are trying to do something new or different?

Ben: Talk to a lot of people. Find a way to collaborate or have your visions overlap. You just have to have a lot of conversations about what you're doing, and be willing to be flexible. Also: Work with a collaborator, or even a bigger group of people. There are so many times when you just need to rely on other people.

Tara: Especially for these sorts of projects, if you don't have a community, there's no joy in it. And, when you do reach out to people, you'll be surprised how kind and generous they'll be with their time and resources.

Ben: One other thing... Figure out a way to just give yourself skills you can use to make money. Then you'll set yourself up to have the funding you need for projects in the future. A lot of artists are like, "I'm an artist! I gotta be an artist all the time!" But that way of thinking needs to be challenged. There's nothing wrong with building skills that people are willing to pay you for.

In 2017, what do you think artists need the most?

Tara: More connections, and a stronger sense of community. The arts will always need patrons, so I wonder, who are the patrons in 2017?

Ben: Also, time and space. That was something that we wanted, and felt we lacked in the Bay Area. Space for independent introspection and for pursuing our own projects, but also time and space to be with other people. Just slowing-down space, having the time to think about things differently versus the never-ending news cycle and everything else that seems to be going on every day.

A lot of artists fear moving out of the city because they fear feeling irrelevant or out of the loop. What has it been like leaving the Bay Area and living in Point Arena?

Tara: Well, the internet changes the game. For the first year and a half of this project, we were coming to Point Arena every single weekend, doing a six-hour drive to come up here and work. Then we'd go back to our city lives, where we did the 9 to 5 thing. That was definitely a dual life. Since we've moved up here, I can't even remember what we were doing in the city.

Ben: My feeling on the tension of the double life is: Don't worry about it. If you feel like you made the wrong decision, you can just change your lifestyle up again.

Ben Lotan and Tara Shi recommend:

a long, slow walk

[Speculating Futures](#), a reading list by [New Inquiry](#)

[Orr Hot Springs](#)

[The First World War](#), 10 part documentary on WWI

In the Aura of a Hole: Exploring Sites of Material Extraction by A. Laurie Palmer

Vacuum Sealers

Extended Time at the Prelinger Library

Name

Ben Lotan and Tara Shi

Vocation

Artists, Curators

Fact

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