

what
is
a
great
lake

?

what
is
a
mississippi
river

?

Three Ecologies

MULTISPECIES

Multispecies ecology names the relational web linking all things into a metabolic process: Gaia, the living planet, embodied in rivers, forests, fields, mountains, oceans and the undulating tapestry of the sky.

Nature as "web of life" looks fragile in the human era. Chainsaws and bulldozers make short work of it. Yet nothing on Earth is so pervasive as biology. Bacterial metabolism created the atmosphere. Insects dwarf all other categories of biomass. Forests of trees or kelp cover surfaces beyond measure. Even the cities are full of birds if you listen. The problem is, we lack a form of value for earthly relations. Planting a tree, growing a garden or leaving the road for a river-journey are ways to care beyond the human world. Ecology is more than an interaction system. It's a full-on cosmovision.

SOCIAL

Social ecology names common situations: families, clubs, associations, institutions, corporations, governments, usually caught in some combination of free cooperation and hierarchy founded on tacit violence.

In the past, social institutions were conceived on the order of lifetimes. But now all time is money, and capitalist enterprise has become entirely predatory. Work itself – and skill, and livelihood – is threatened with obsolescence. Experimentation is being forced on us by the political-economic breakdown, and the key question is the agency of intentional groups. How much can we do autonomously? Can we teach each other? Heal each other? Hire each other? Speak to each other? Remaking social practices was always possible in theory. Now there are chances to try it on the ground.

PSYCHIC

Psychic ecology names the circulation of signs, symbols, affects and expressions that constitutes us as individuals: by attending to the flow and intervening, we conduct the rhythm of our lives.

Like lovers, shamans and musicians, artists create particular spaces and times for psychic interplay. To engage with an atmosphere as it evolves is to hold the aesthetic conditions of existence in your own hands. The political power of art is not to imagine the future, but to live an alternative present. Performance has developed an ethics of immediacy that brings existence upfront before others. In this way it enables a genuine response. Could the same thing be done more broadly among dispersed groups, through a sharing of existential territories, to overcome the dead ends that society is imposing?

Watershed Art & Ecology is a community cultural center in Chicago. There's an exhibition space, a reading room, a residency. We want to share resources and build worlds. Let's make the Midwest artistic ecosystem real.

(Broadside freely inspired by Félix Guattari and Peter Berg)