Eating Climate Change with Making the Best of It
Dandelion: Collaborative Public Art as a Mode of Future-Oriented Learning

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Abstract: Long-term public art projects that engage public audiences in collaborative learning can be powerful venues for exploring public pedagogy and for investigating the mechanisms that allow people to learn and change. In the iterative and exploratory modes such projects usually require, we can learn a tremendous amount from interactions over time among the many audiences and networks that these projects involve—creative teams, production crews, performance staff, volunteers, participants, onlookers, and viewers of documentation. This article discusses a year-long public art project designed to engage diverse audiences in imaginative consideration of their future agency in the face of a changing climate. The project was carried out in a range of settings—public art festivals, university symposia, community meals, seminars and large lecture classrooms, and online—and the process provided many opportunities to learn about the methodology of developing and carrying out participatory future-casting events. The varied frameworks of this project provided practice with a range of interaction mechanics, and also provided participants with the chance to learn, with others, how to leverage the familiar in order to address the strange. We consider how this project maintains a focus on inclusive and equitable process in future building, and particularly how explicitly focusing on play, silence, beauty, stress, and the more-than-human contributes to successful learning, and to moving beyond some of the barriers we commonly experience in sustainability-oriented teaching and social organizing.

Keywords: climate change; social engagement; public art; public pedagogy; invasive species; collaborative learning; speculative fiction.
Teaching toward the future of climate justice work

“Join us in a ritual festivity that invites you to become more dandelion,” our most recent project invitation reads. “From trans-species oration to cow eulogies to intimate ocean tributes, this is the party of Making the Best of It, a communal service compressed into the space of a toast—a toast to how all of us are making the best of it, now and in the future.” This rallying cry was used to recruit participants and support staff for a public art installation in St. Paul, Minnesota as part of Northern Spark 2017, an all-night art festival with ~50,000 participants produced by Northern Lights.mn and held each year in the Twin Cities on a Saturday before the summer solstice.

*Making the Best of It: Dandelion* premiered at Northern Spark 2016, which was themed around "Climate Chaos" and extended through the year up to the "People Rising" themed Northern Spark festival in 2017.

The broader *Making the Best of It* project is a series of regional, site-specific food and art installations and community meals that feature an edible species whose presence in the region is enabled or exacerbated by climate-change—often unwanted species such as a dandelion. Participants taste the food and talk about the risks of climate chaos, our business-as-usual food system, ecological equity, and the food innovations they may be able to use to make the best of the situations presented by climate change. In Minnesota, *Making the Best of It: Dandelion* invited participants to explore climate change through eating (and eating with) dandelions, an introduced plant common to the upper Midwest. The dandelion eating took place at the all-night “Northern Spark” events. In 2016, a series of dandelion snacks were offered at an installation of “snack shacks,” and in 2017, rounds of toasts were offered while participants drank a dandelion *kvass*—a fermented beverage made from beets and popular in Russia. As part of the 2017 project, individual participants were also invited to offer an acknowledgement, a eulogy, or brief reflection on humans from the point of view of a non-human identity they had been assigned.
These tributes emphasized non-human to human relationships in a scenario presented in the project where humans have not survived climate change.

Below we describe the development of *Making the Best of It: Dandelion* beginning with a brief overview of the project and its stages. We then elaborate on the insights gained through the process and conclude with an analysis of how the project supported collaborative learning that nudged us and participants past dystopian and catastrophic futures, while also providing space for grief, loss, disruptive joy, and acknowledgement of danger. We also consider how the insights from this project promote inclusive and equitable future building. We focus particularly on how play, silence, beauty, stress, and the more-than-human move participants beyond some of the barriers we commonly experience in sustainability-oriented teaching and social organizing and contribute to successful learning.

*Figure 1: Future Topophagies, eating the future (Image credit: Valentine Cadieux)*
Developing MTBOI Dandelion as a Refuge for Eating Climate: Inclusive and Equitable Process in Future Building

For *Making the Best of It: Dandelion*, the authors were commissioned to partner with climate scientists, educators, students, foragers, chefs, community leaders, and other local people to create food and conversation events for the Northern Spark Festival. We chose the humble dandelion, *Taraxacum officinale*, as our symbol. Abundant, nutritious, adorable, and disliked (but not necessarily hated), this invasive plant offers opportunities for thinking about human and interspecies well-being on a variety of levels. It is highly adaptable, does well in disturbed ecosystems, and offers value to a variety of species, from bees to residents in the human gut microbiome. In addition, the dandelion’s anatomical response to different environmental conditions makes it an interesting guide for exploring the complexity of climate instability.

*Making the Best of It: Dandelion* was presented in two contexts: first, as part of custom pop-up flatpack food shack that served free samples of the signal species prepared as novel street food, accompanied by information, provocations, and recipes in graphic form. The second context, beyond the Northern Spark festival, though still part of the refinement of our project between the yearly festival events, was a series of potluck-style dinners that took place in St. Paul and Minneapolis over the 2016/17 season. The potlucks featured dishes of dandelion, the signal species, and diners brought their own dishes addressing innovation, loss, change, and preservation of meaningful foods in the context of a shifting climate.

Developing *Making the Best of It Dandelion* as a way to explore implications of climate change, our driving symbolic question was: How do we eat the future? To address this question in the early stages of the project, we used a set of seven parameters from which people drew selections in order to construct a scene for a picnic, in a project we called *Future Topophagies* (Figure 1, using *topos*, place, and -*phagy*, denoting the practice of eating particular food).
Climate scientists and artists participated in such workshops over two days, culminating in our taking over the gallery space of the 2014 Making Living Thinking show at the University of Minnesota Nash gallery. For an afternoon, we prototyped, cooked, and shared the resulting picnics. The idea of a flatpack pop-up snack shed that could connect people in different places to discuss food and climate change emerged from this project. We chose to focus on eating a signal species, something invasive that inhabits rapidly changing ecosystems and social systems (Poe 2013, Terra Fluxus 2016, Ostrom et al. 1999)—food that might survive climate change and would also invoke a future where conditions might be so different as to be challenging to imagine. After it appeared as a recurring character in these picnic scenarios, we settled on the dandelion.

Figure 2: Making the Best of It: Dandelion 2016, site overview (Image credits: Dusty Hoskovec, Sean Smuda)
Participants discussed the dandelion as signal species, dandelion phenology and climate opportunism (Raffaele 2010), dandelion as a metaphor of class and racial divides (Terra Fluxus 2016), and as a tool for getting people to notice ambivalence and contradictions through their relationships with dandelions. Multiple teams identified dandelions as a fun, engaging, nimble food. They remembered puffing on seed heads as children. Some testers enjoyed dandelion’s trickster role: as an adversary without being an enemy, particularly in the context of American lawn norms. In addition to the many edible possibilities, everyone quickly identified dandelion’s bitterness as a provocative conceptual tonic and jumped quickly into the relationship between eating dandelions and health of the gut microbiome as a decentered platform for considering internal climate change.

We designed the interaction mechanics of the project around the idea of the dandelion as a gift (Horton and Freire 1990, De Waal 1996, Komter 2002, Hyde 2009, Graeber 2011, Moten and Harney 2013). We explored what this transaction would mean in terms of the architecture of the project and the participants’ expectations. It was challenging to create an actual meal plan where food could be served legally and fast enough to thousands of festival-goers and that would also offer a meaningful learning experience. We worked through various iterations of site mechanics inspired by our playtesting, including urban nests (Verdonck 2008), lookout towers or platforms (Cadieux 2016), architectural follies and mnemonic landscapes (Potteiger and Purington 1998). We wanted to offer a set of components that could be assembled in different ways, and we also wanted the project to offer learning at various experiential scales: intimate participation, proximate walk-by, and walking-by-at-a-distance. We decided that our format of experience needed to be an unfolding time-based interaction, not just a singular shoving of a dandelion in your mouth.
Divvying the site up into a perimeter, entry path, and central refuge, we designed serving stations with call and response interaction mechanics. We served provocative dandelion foods with questions on fortune cookie slips (Figure 3), dividing the festival night’s focus by dishes based on plant sections—root, leaves, and flower dishes were served at different stages of the night. We were inspired by Bonnie Bright’s 2016 invocation, in her essay on “Confronting Signs of a Society in Decline,” of Joanna Macy suggesting “that we, as humans, collectively live in fear of confronting the despair that we all carry—a despair that derives from dread of realizing for the first time that the human species may not pull through.”

Figure 3: Making the Best of It snack “fortunes”/closing prompts as served from the Refuge (Image credits: Jayme Halbritter top left, rest Sean Smuda, fortune slips Marina Zurkow)

MTBOI Dandelion Version 1: The Dandelion Refuge Tour

We wanted to build a project that would be convincing to a wide range of collaborators, many of whom had not ever been asked to explore implications of climate change. Consequently, our
most significant decisions had to do with keeping the project open to a diversity of perspectives, and resisting an interaction mechanic that reinforced already established ideas or that used art as decoration for propaganda. The tendency toward didactic pedagogy in sustainability work and climate education means that many people often don’t get to be creative around the topic of climate change. It also exacerbates disparities in who gets heard, and reinforces common patterns of dominant loud voices and disengagement by quieter ones. We wanted to address these issues by moving beyond the familiar and by creating a process that was radically open to what participants would bring to it. Beyond the obvious benefits of getting people talking about climate change and related society-environment dynamics, one of the persistent challenges of climate justice teaching is designing genuinely inclusive transformative pedagogy. Preset answers—and even preset framings of climate problems—may contribute to reducing the relevance, credibility, or legitimacy of sustainability learning, particularly in communities that are disproportionately affected (International Climate Justice Network 2002, Cash et al. 2003, Phadke et al. 2015). We decided to address these challenges by inviting participation from a cohort of guides who would welcome participants to explore their own relationships with dandelions. We oriented the guides to a set of common themes all visitors our site would experience through a series of practice tours and exploratory meals before the first festival and created a “dandyzine” pocket field guide for them to use. Guides were encouraged to walk people through the site experience based on their own various perspectives on dandelions and climate—and to encourage participants, similarly, to bring their perspectives into the way they interacted with the site. Our interaction mechanics were designed so that people could come into the site, be quickly oriented to the conversation, and have a successful experience of genuinely open exploration.
Figure 4: Guides (above, a–d) and (below, e–g) Gut fairies on the microbiome stop of the tour and preparing (Image credits: a, b, d, g, Sean Smuda, c, Max Haynes, e, Jayme Halbritter, f, Valentine Cadieux)
Identified by a yellow umbrella large enough for about six participants, guides invited participants to embark on a tour of the site. Guides shared a brief introduction to their own relationship to dandelions and invited participants to do the same, in turn, framed in whatever way they wished. Participants then traveled through three stops in the site, at three polycarbonate and cedar greenhouse-like structures. The first structure was the “microbiome” focused structure, inhabited by a “gut fairy” dressed in a head-to-toe yellow spandex suit, who dripped dandelion tincture into each participant’s mouth and discussed the microbiome relationships dandelions participate in when humans eat them. (Not one of the over five hundred people who took the site tour refused this intimate initiation!)

The second structure focused on dandelions’ macrocosmic relationships to the wider world. A large bowl of dandelion greens was passed between participants to eat as they sat on benches looking out over the head of the navigable Mississippi River, surrounded by monuments to the development of the commodity food system of Minneapolis, the “flour city.” Here, dandelions were often discussed as something that is not a commodity. For example, some guides described how preparing the twenty five pounds of dandelion root pickles we served took so much time that we decided not to count the many hours it took to collect, trim, wash, and ferment them—labor that would make the pickles impossibly expensive to sell. At the same time, even though dandelions are “free,” dandelion greens are sold at upscale grocery stores all around the Twin Cities twelve months of the year, making them very much part of the commodity food system. The tour ended at a refuge structure serving dishes chefs had crafted out of dandelions.

Having established rapport over the 15 or 20 minutes they’d been in the site, participants were then prompted to discuss how they would “make the best of it” moving into the future.

We learned a lot from this process, including that people had more relationships with dandelions than we had expected. It was a plant that everyone had touched, so participants had a
palpable and tactile relationship with it. Many people expressed guilt and shame both about allowing dandelions to mar their lawns and also recognizing their culpability in trying to eradicate them. They also acknowledged dandelions’ many values and were gently prompted to think critically about cultural eradication impulses and histories more generally.

For every participant who said, “I don’t really know what my relationship with dandelions is,” there were several who had gathered them with their grandmothers to be eaten or to be used as medicine. Others had picked dandelions as children because they were being paid to remove them as weeds (and to remove them thoroughly, so they knew the structure of the plant), or because they had made dandelion chains and crowns or smeared yellow on each other or they had eaten fried dandelions in Scouts. People’s grounding in their shared experiences with dandelions made them more open to exploration and to a level of engagement in talking about climate change that we had not previously experienced in either public art projects or in classroom work. Many people told us that this was one of the most fun experiences they had at the art festival and described how the experience would change the way they taught and discussed climate change.

One of the most significant pieces of feedback we received was that we had made a calm refuge that was particularly appealing within the context of a chaotic festival designed to explore a chaotic topic. The beauty of the setting—and it was a simple but beautiful setting—invited people in, strongly enough that many were willing to stand in line alongside the site for two hours to experience it (most waited over 45 minutes). Participants felt supported through their explorations of an odd, serious, fanciful relationship that provoked questions about the stressful topic of how we are dealing with the uncertainties of climate change. The power of calm and beauty to attract interest and exploration in this context inspired the rest of the project process. People stood in line through the entire night waiting to go through this fifteen-to-twenty-minute
experience. Even a late-night thunderstorm did not clear out the 4am crew, as we were sure it would; when the thunderstorm ended, there were teenagers huddled damply in line, telling each other stories about dandelions and coming up with climate change and dandelion puns to be part of the project’s storytelling process.

**MTBOI Dandelion transitional version: Potlucks and libraries**

A significant part of our creative process emerged from thinking through various food scenarios and what they represented. We observed the affective texture of regret, attachment, and enthusiasm that animated people’s engagement with the ideas and memories prompted by dandelions. In order to build these qualities into the mechanics of the project, we experimented with a series of potluck meals and a collaborative library project. We organized themed potlucks where artist organizers created a supportive framework for a meal, then invited participants to share explorations of food and climate change. In order to keep participants’ thoughts from tending toward the paralyzingly catastrophic, heavy maudlin, or trite twee defaults, we asked people about specific experiences they wanted to invoke, for example, experiences of joy. We also acknowledged the stress of loss and danger—and we played with different words for effectively framing our conversations: “risk” got into a very abstract domain, for example, whereas “danger” cut more directly to the visceral fears.
This ongoing reinvention of the project ideas and assets led us to create an open source library to document and share the snippets and instructions from everyone who had contributed to the project. Using guiding metaphors of recipe boxes, readers, seeds, and dinner party napkins, we attempted to file ideas in ways that supported newcomers to the project, helped further engagement, and provided a place for the organizing team to store ideas that weren’t currently front and center. We filed these shared pieces of knowledge in an “oration library.” We built a physical platform that overlooked the line-up area into the project where people waiting in line were invited—or commissioned—to take a turn on the oration platform, speaking or reading aloud from the library.
Figure 6: Oration platform for reading aloud from the Making the Best of It Dandelion library, poised above those in line to enter (Image credits: Sean Smuda)

As the project accumulated materials around particular questions and lines of inquiry, the library became a place where experiential interpretations made by participants could be added to the representational work done by the official project artist educators. For example, many people contributed artifacts about *change*, as well as questions they wanted others to answer about
change: What about the weather makes you nervous or afraid? What changes would affect your ability to get whatever you need to live? Superpowers were also explored in detail: When you have felt pushed to your limits, what superpower comes out in you, that allows you to cope and manage and DO things? What do you enjoy about that feeling? What can/do you do with that flow feeling and superpower capacity when pulled out of crisis? How do you eat that feeling/make it into something you can ingest to boost you when it's less available or particularly needed? As we continued to grapple with how to make it clear what the dandelion has to do with climate change for our ever-changing audience, this library of shared insights and inquiries became one of our superpowers, helping transcend the individual focus of so much climate change discourse toward a much more relational nimbleness.

MTBOI Dandelion Plans for Version 2: The Climate Party

The dandelion party platform came out of the themes that guided the project. Dandelions are resilient, you couldn’t kill them, they would thrive with climate change; when you mow them down, they come back. As an artifact of how people saw what we were getting to—a dandelion that is making the best of it, perhaps even growing better with carbon dioxide levels rising—we had several requests for readings of Cicely Mary Barker’s “The song of the Dandelion fairy” (from Flower Fairies of the Spring, 1923), with its cheerfully defiant message:

“Gay and naughty in the garden;
Pull me up—I grow again,
Asking neither leave nor pardon.
Sillies, what are you about
With your spades and hoes of iron?
You can never drive me out—
Me, the dauntless Dandelion!”

Inspired by this message, we tried to figure out how to encourage people to take action beyond the brief time we had to interact with them. We planned an event organized around the theme of stump speeches and festive political parties, where dandelions were campaigning for less eradication, for more tolerance of polyculture, and against the use of pesticides in lawns. We designed slogans that could be used for lawn signs or be printed on people’s clothing or put on postcards you wrote to yourself at the event: “Don’t be a weedest”; “Pledge-n-Spread” the Climate Party platform; “Grass Roots; Free Greens”; “Recipe to Activate Your Lawn”; WEED IT (with dead pollinators) / EAT IT (with underappreciated plants). We developed a list of “campaign shared assets” (“CSA,” riffing on “community supported agriculture”) that included kits of transformative campaign tools, such as seed packets, buttons, table games, dialogue guides, and sign-up booths—artifacts that showed the energy of the project’s momentum and contributors’ creative learning. This energy became difficult to maintain substantively, however, in the second half of the project under the changed political regime.

Faced with the stark reality of Trump’s climate policy, party politics became a daunting platform for continuing the work of our project. Instead, we recognized that a refuge for grief could complement the invitation we had already made in the first half of the project to surface the fear of danger and loss. Along with our invitation to notice and experience enjoyment, curiosity, and dissonances in climate learning, we consequently studied how to invite people to perform their grief (Macy 1979, Halifax 2004, Levine 2005, Slocum and Cadieux 2015). Inspired by the way the project Dear Climate treated the atmosphere as if it had personhood (Zurkow and Kellhammer 2014) and by many projects we have drawn on (Rich 2003, Seanhk-Ka and Axtell 2007, Chatman 2008, Rocheleau 2008, Seghal 2010, Yeh 2010, Sachs 2011, Simon
we constructed the closing spectacle of Making the Best of It as a funeral for humans, hosted by dandelions.

**MTBOI Dandelion Revised Version 2: Memorial Service for the Humans**

In the culminating festival version of *MTBOI: Dandelion*, participants entered a line-up area, delineated by yellow ropes tied in dandelion-shaped knots that led up to a large, glowing greenhouse structure. The structure was surrounded by a library of napkins hung on surrounding light strings as bunting. Key themes from the potluck meals and project library were written or embroidered onto the napkins. Participants were greeted by a dramaturge who handed each visitor a role written on a large yellow sign to be worn around the neck and a template pro forma for a memorial speech toast printed on the back—to riff on or to fill in. The roles were all non-human beings or artifacts that had remained in this climate change scenario where humans had not made it. Participants were asked to enter the sod-carpeted structure, four at a time, to fill in two two-person sod-covered benches in the back of two rows of such benches. Each person deposited their shoes at the entry and received a small compostable cup of salty fermented dandelion kvass.
Figure 7: *Making the Best of It: Dandelion* in the context of the Little Mekong Plaza Night Market 2017 (Image credit: Anna Min) and Dandelions’ representation of the deceased (Image credit: Marina Zurkow)
An emcee in the role of a dandelion invited the four participants who had been sitting in the back to move up to the front row and, once all were seated, welcomed the assembled and asked each of the beings in the front row to give a toast celebrating the humans. To toast the humans from their respective roles, each participant stepped up onto a grassy stage impregnated with weeds, donned an oration shawl printed with the image of dandelions growing through a human, and offered a reflection on the humans to the assembled. When all four had spoken and the assembly had responded by raising their cups with acclaim, they were each offered a dandelion seed and helped to plant it in their emptied cups at a wooden box filled with dirt. Participants could bring the seedling home to plant or could plant it in the dandelions’ memorial lawn around the structure. Then they were ushered out the sod path to collect their shoes at the exit to the pavement of the surrounding festival while musicians played and the next round of toasts was set up. More than four hundred people gave toasts in this setting.

The mechanic was an easy point of entry: everyone seemed to understand, from their own perspective, what it meant to speak of the dead at a funeral or wake. Like the potlucks and the tours, this kind of mechanic gave participants a foothold into work that queers relations between species, between humans and the climate, between foods we eat and those we do not. The template for this interaction became something we shared after the event in our Dandelion Reader—a resource that could be used in any context, from a ten-minute classroom exercise to the focus of a meal.
Figure 8: Core components of the do-it-yourself MTBOI kit from the Dandelion Reader: memorial prompts, readings, name tags (Image credits: Renee Innis)
Analysis: Discovering and Cultivating, in Peaceful Settings, Superpowers to Use in Chaotic Times

Play and the More-Than-Human

We committed to a sense of play—with both the purposeful enjoyment and flexibility that the word conveys. We experimented with the balance between providing participants with supportive rules that would keep them engaged with our experiential goals for them while also encouraging their collaboration in the implementation and even modification of these rules. In both creating and following these rules, we attempted to encourage participants to release compulsions of habit and perceived necessity. We left space open for topics and approaches that the learners would care about and we also created scaffolds to support people’s engagement in the interaction mechanics we had designed.

Disruptive play was most successful in the project’s invocation of the future and in enabling people to hear and feel each other’s voices and experiences there. Pushing people beyond their habit of being human helped push people beyond vague generalities into genuine bewilderment. Standing in line trying to figure out how to be nematode or Splenda meant that people had to draw on each other’s experiences or knowledge (or smartphones). This collaborative exploration gave participants a chance to practice being non-human and to remind each other how that might work.
Figure 9: Standing in line developing roles, Making the Best of It: Dandelion 2017 (Image credits: Dan Marshall)
**Beauty and Substance**

Our dedication to integrating our site, mechanics, and larger project in inclusive and transformative ways meant that the majority of the work on this project was focused on process. Although the production of the potlucks, library, and festival was time consuming, our focus on process meant that the more mechanical aspects of the project were pared down to elegant manifestations of our process intentions. Everything was designed to support the rules governing the interaction mechanics so that there were opportunities for the core team (the central artists writing here, and the production staff and volunteers that worked closely with them) to learn how to approach topics and situations according to the ethos of the project. The project left space for people (even those wrapped up in the rush of guiding festival goers through the two Northern Spark projects) to notice the reactions and relationships being enacted, and to negotiate change as needed. Celebrating this relational attention as a core virtue of “making the best of it” nimbly meant that the project was experientially beautiful and rewarding for most of the core participants, despite the 100+-degrees Fahrenheit weather during the setup of both Northern Sparks.

Rule iterations allowed the core team members and guides, as well as participants, to slide along a series of different axes of experience and context. They could pick up and put down their engagement with the outlandish spectacle aspects of the project as needed. They could use different degrees of imaginative effort, fidelity of representation (for example, performing the role of Housefly by talking about it, or by buzzing), and they could perform respect, stress, hilarity, and a range of other values and experiences with different intensity depending on their mood, capacity, or energy level (which we saw fluctuate over the course of the festival, and with different waves of participants)(Slocum et al. 1995, Cash et al. 2003, Sachs 2011, Cadieux et al. 2016). The cognitive and experiential flexibility encouraged—especially under the salient
extreme weather conditions—helped make the extensive underlying intellectual infrastructure of the project bubble up when needed without didacticism, especially in the second Northern Spark iteration, where team members periodically invoked periods of silence and meditation as needed, for example.

Figure 10: The Dandelion Clock, for indicating when the MTBOI performance was “talking about the humans” or meditating in silence (Image credit, as with all graphics: Marina Zurkow; photograph, Dan Marshall; kvass in jars, Jim Bovino, Topos Fermentation)

The benefits of the aspirational framework became increasingly evident in the team’s work over the course of the year. We became increasingly invested in exploring and institutionalizing group process appropriate to our task. We worked to create a collaborative space where participants could try out an idea that other people might be inspired by enough to
join in until it had taken enough shape to get feedback, then genuinely listen and make changes in response to that feedback, and where everyone was able to stay in these iterations without too much ego or too many arbitrary suggestions. This process made participants practice figuring out how much work to put into something before getting feedback. People found strength and rhythm from working together, even when new members of the crew from a wide range of backgrounds and ages joined the process. Especially when intensity or tension arose in work meetings, we became practiced at initiating check-ins: Do we need to shift what we’re doing? Let’s check to see if we need to stop for a meal or a rest or meditation? Do we need to work outside? Should we use our bodies in different ways or cluster in different groups? This work practice led to a sense of agency and continual re-energizing that was especially noticeable for the many difficult tasks we set ourselves.

**Stress and Silence**

The collaborative process of developing rules, allowing a team a chance to try things, getting feedback, rethinking, and responding to tests and others’ reactions, required a communal management of project stress. Amid the crush of a giant public art festival, hosts of a project such as ours often feel compelled to perform hospitality and to hold the space for creative engagement. Like people faced with serious futures they need to learn about, hosts might find themselves overly absorbed in being busy (Groys 2002). Consequently, it can be challenging to ground oneself enough to invite people to fully and nimbly experience the stress of climate futures so that they could also experience the relief of a refuge and learn what they’re capable of in the face of chaos. Asking people to give a short speech as a non-human in front of expectant peers while drinking salty fermented weeds gave them a glimpse of the imaginative learning they could embark on. Participants were able to sit quietly with the absurdity of not being alive humans anymore and they seemed able to access the sense of accomplishment that comes with
having faced stress. Our potentially transformative pedagogical message was that some silence in the face of daunting uncertainty is necessary to balance out some of the time we spend talking about the humans.

Making the Best of It

This project has significantly influenced the way we conduct classroom and public teaching, and has helped us to identify and address three categories of barriers to transformative learning that we often encounter in future-oriented pedagogy, especially in projects that use art to engage learners. Addressing these three barriers seemed functionally important for this work of teaching the future, and we wished to make it available beyond the spectacle of the art festival installation, resulting in the analysis of this article, the Dandelion Memorial Reader memorializing the contributions to the project so far, and including instructions for hosting one’s own MTBOI!

First, we built a space for people to practice divergent interactive skills—of working together across difference—that contribute to more equitable and inclusive processes and outcomes in projects. We practiced this inclusivity both in the way that we framed collaboration—setting up the project with many opportunities to explicitly welcome a wide range of approaches—and in our responsiveness to those approaches. We intentionally made spaces that were distanced as far as possible away from normative cultural frames and that would, for example in the space of a funeral, privilege specific cultural forms of mourning. By creating space that supported people moving away from human habits, we tried to support awareness of the strength of those habits in framing most of our assumptions and values. We encouraged people to experiment with what it was like to let their assumptions go or to hold them more gently, while also asking them to come up with creative stances toward the future that could
resonate with their audiences. We encouraged learning that would hopefully set participants up to be successful in future interactions with people, asking them to learn creatively rather than responding with anger, defensiveness, or depression. Further, we encouraged creative learning in the form of both arbitrary and purposeful disruptions designed to reveal supportive structures and also instabilities of the status quo.

Second, we addressed the joint problems of educators wanting to organize learning as a tour through a pre-set trajectory of ideas, and of art being used as decoration for projects seeking to elicit and document community perspectives on a topic. Although art-based approaches can be effective and appropriate as engagement tools or decoration, this tendency toward using art fundamentally as a mode of advertising—where the creative work is done behind the scenes by artists—rarely engages participants in the conceptual framework enabled by art as a mode of inquiry.

Third, and crucially, we often witnessed stress-fueled shut down in the work of our students and of our colleagues where daunting pressures of the future significantly undermined their ability to remain engaged. Here, we’ve described how the development and inhabiting of this project addressed these types of problems and created space for play and the more-than-human, for beauty and substance, and for finding ways to remain engaged in the future even when it provokes stress. When asked to engage with the project, a surprising number of people revealed that they had always wished that they could be invited into such a project, but that they didn’t know how to initiate that engagement and couldn’t imagine having the skills to carry it out. However, given the brilliant performances by almost all participants, we realized that we do not usually ask people to go far enough in imaginative exercises. Asking people to think about things that they might be willing to live without or be afraid of losing allowed participants to identify sophisticated affective dimensions of culture that we had not previously witnessed in
climate education. They talked about “the possibility of institutions,” “impassable parts of the world,” sacrificing the perfect green lawn to give back to the soil, “understanding that there's a relationship [and that everything you give up is] an opportunity to learn more about yourself.”

Asked to identify superpowers that might be claimed in the calm refuge and used in more chaotic times, people listed subtle powers such as “positivity, or a sense of resourcefulness, rather than despair,” “understanding the underlying connections that are unseen,” holding on to the sense of “hey, we're not doomed,” in addition to more obvious powers like “the ability to clean up any water source.” Together with the many beautiful elegies to humans (collected in the Dandelion Memorial Reader), such responses emphasized the value of extending imaginative, speculative tools to people when they are looking toward the future but are daunted, which is so often the case in the face of climate change. Some experiential container—a scaffold or platform—can prompt attention to shaping the exploratory space, asking people to share where they’ve come from, and providing a comfortably narrow bandwidth within which to explore what parts of the future the viewer might be responsible for.

Acknowledgements

Making the Best of It: Dandelion was commissioned and presented by Northern Lights.mn with the support of the National Endowment for the Arts and the Knight Foundation. We thank the many participants who made this project, and the many people who supported it, including Jim Bovino at Topos Fermentation, Courtney Tchida and Corncopia Farm, Steve Dietz, Sarah Peters, and the NorthernLights.mn crew and advisors, Aaron Marx, Sarah Petersen, Eden Rome, The Good Acre, Dan Marshall, Tracey Deutsch, the Storymobile, Elise Hanson and the students in Feeding a Crowd, Matt Frank, Rachel Mazac, Sarah Nassif, and the many dandelions and people-becoming-dandelions that constructed, harvested, guided, and ate with this project.
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