

Productivity or What We Will

by [Ruofan Li](#)

Sky Peshier, 2005 is an outdoor art installation by James Turrell. Its design is simple: an enclosed space with a rectangular window, where visitors can sit and observe the sky. As someone who is enchanted by sky and sunshine, I decided to simulate it one morning: I observed the sky through the window of my dorm, as if it were a replica of *Sky Peshier, 2005*. Although I tried to immerse myself in the experience, I found it surprisingly hard to concentrate: There were so many things running through my head. But then, I noticed things that I had missed at first glance: a thin layer of clouds floating in the center of the otherwise clear sky and the curtains in an office building across the street that looked like bangs. I could almost imagine the people who were busy behind those curtains. I felt, at that moment, intimately connected with the world through my window – all while I did nothing.

In her lecture “How to Do Nothing,” digital artist and writer Jenny Odell encourages everyone to do nothing. Many of her art projects, like mapping cities or building an Internet archive of 1980s posters, aim only to present “something in a new context,” rather than make something totally new (00:02:26-00:02:30). She has a practice of “doing nothing” – stopping to observe her environment rather than act upon it – in public spaces in Oakland, which “enact[s] some kind of removal from the habitual every day” (00:14:12-00:14:17). Although she doesn’t explicitly explain her rationale behind making and doing nothing, it can be inferred that these moments are, for her, processes of reinterpretation, where different nuanced connections are made as she puts either the

subject of her artwork or herself in new contexts. Odell argues that the experience of doing nothing is not a self-indulgent “luxury”; rather, “it’s a right” (00:20:32-00:20:37). She refers to the song “Eight Hours,” an anthem for the labor movement during the late nineteenth century. The chorus goes, “Eight hours for work, eight hours for sleep, eight hours for what we will” (“Eight Hours” qtd. in Odell). This call to action for factory workers and laborers “requires that humans have time for personal reflection and communion with nature” (“Eight Hours”). Odell interprets the line “what we will” as a very “humane” expression (00:20:50-00:20:57). She recognizes that our current emphasis on “productivity and efficiency” results from the dissolution of the eight-hour work cycle into “24 potentially monetizable hours” (00:25:25-00:25:30). When we are confined inside capitalist structures that prioritize results and economic return and minimize economic security, we lose sovereignty over our own lives. Then, time for “what we will,” or “doing nothing,” becomes a luxury.

In his essay “Productivity Isn’t About Time Management. It’s About Attention Management,” Adam Grant, an organizational psychologist, provides another perspective on productivity and attention. Like Odell, Grant acknowledges our common anxieties about time: “There are a limited number of hours in the day, and focusing on time management just makes us more aware of how many of those hours we waste.” Therefore, he promotes an alternative mindset called “attention management,” where, instead of focusing on time, we should focus on our motivations and how much attention we devote to different tasks. But while both are interested in attention, Odell and Grant differ in their ultimate goals. Odell promotes the reclamation of our attention as a rebellion against the “colonization of [the] self by the capitalist idea of efficiency and productivity,” whereas Grant sees mindfulness as a means of attaining even higher productivity (00:24:09-00:24:13).

If our pursuit of productivity is depriving us of time for “what we will,” are we able to devote time to getting back our will when we leave the workplace? Odell questions

that. When we spend time on our cell phones to “relax,” Odell perceives that we actually “assault ourselves with information and misinformation at a rate that is frankly inhumane” (00:30:25-00:30:31). How do online platforms and devices affect us during our time off? The documentary *The Social Dilemma* reveals a complicated relationship between users and platforms. Interviewing influential figures from tech companies in Silicon Valley, the documentary examines the problems posed by these platforms to individuals and society. Specifically, it explains how the time and attention users spend staring at the screen of their cellphones is monetizable when sold to advertisers. “We’re the product,” says Justin Rosenstein, a former engineer at Facebook and Google. “Our attention is the product” (qtd. in Orłowski 00:14:09-00:14:14). The documentary also demonstrates how algorithms work with data collected from users to build a model that predicts, and therefore even controls, user behavior. As we scroll endlessly through content recommended by an algorithm, it seems that another kind of freedom, Odell’s “what we will,” has already been lost. However, are our attention and freedom the only things that were unconsciously given away when using these online platforms?

In an interview in the documentary, Tristan Harris, a former employee of Google and founder of the Center for Humane Technology, warns, “we’re training and conditioning a whole new generation of people that when we are uncomfortable or lonely or uncertain or afraid we have a digital pacifier”: our phones (00:43:24-00:43:40). This “digital pacifier” is “atrophying our own ability” to face negative emotions (00:43:24-00:43:40). That is exactly how I normally deal with emotional downturns: by picking up my cell phone. In doing so, however, we isolate ourselves even further, not only from what exists outside the virtual world, but also from our own thoughts and feelings. When we become numb to ourselves and not able to hear our own inner perspective, we lose our ability to think independently, making us even more susceptible to algorithms. Odell identifies this problem as “the triumph of connectivity over sensitivity” (00:43:00-00:43:05). Connectivity is a “quick” process “[shared] by a lot of like-minded people,” while sensitivity is time-consuming, a “difficult, awkward,

ambiguous encounter between two differently shaped bodies that are themselves ambiguous” (00:41:40-00:41:45, 00:42:07-00:42:12). When the situation is complicated by an algorithm, as revealed in *The Social Dilemma*, the question becomes whether meaningful and open conversations are still possible, or whether we will just engage superficially with other like-minded people.

Harris argues that the changes happening on social media have already caused dangerous changes in real life. In recent years, third parties have learned to manipulate algorithms to create “two sides who didn’t hear each other anymore, who didn’t trust each other anymore” (qtd. in Orłowski 01:12:50-01:13:00). According to Jeff Horwitz’s *Wall Street Journal* article “Facebook Knew Calls for Violence Plagued ‘Groups,’ Now Plans Overhaul,” the social media site’s new “Groups” feature has contributed to polarization and violence in the real world. After the 2020 Presidential election, many groups on Facebook organized protests against the results they deemed unfair. Groups, a feature Facebook claimed would “help people make meaningful connections,” were instead taken advantage of by extremist groups and “functioned as a distribution system for ‘low-quality, highly divisive, likely misinformative news content’” (Horwitz). In response, Facebook took down some Groups and banned the algorithmic recommendations of civic and health Groups. However, this was a temporary resolution to a longer-term problem. Are there enough motivations for tech companies to regulate their lucrative algorithms? More importantly, what will happen if we lose the ability to listen to and understand each other?

Our need to listen deeply to one another is exactly why Odell considers doing nothing critical: “Doing nothing,” she says, “teaches us how to listen” (00:40:37-00:40:39). One way Odell ‘does nothing’ is by bird watching: She observes the night herons who flock by a local KFC, the crows standing on the telephone line behind her windows, and the scrub-jays burying their snacks for later. As a birdwatcher, she wonders “what the birds see when they watch” her (00:36:49-00:36:53). Since Odell, herself, is a “human animal,”

she learns to adopt this “alien animal perspective on the world that [she] share[s] with them unexpectedly” (00:37:35-00:37:39).

This connection between Odell and the birds can be interpreted as a restoration to a relationship long lost. In “Why Look at Animals,” John Berger examines the evolution of the relationship between animals and humans. Berger suggests that this relationship was an “existential dualism” from the very beginning (5). Looking at one another “across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension,” animals and humans, Berger writes, lead parallel, “similar/dissimilar” lives: Animals don’t “reserve a special look for man. But by no other species except man will the animal’s look be recognized as familiar” (3, 5). With industrialization and human’s increasingly dominant positions in the world, however, animals were degraded to commercial products or exhibits in zoos, wholly marginalized and almost disappeared from human consideration. By contrast, Odell, when describing the crows that she gives peanuts to, is reassured by both their recognition of and difference from her: “I was just comforted . . . that they recognized me and that whatever they do the rest of the day, they would still come by my apartment still to this day at 11 a.m.” (00:35:18-00:35:30). When Odell is examining her relationship to the birds, trying to look across “the abyss of non-comprehension,” she is also reconstructing her relationship with the world, where she is no longer isolated – the center of the focus is no longer herself only (Berger 5). Repeating to herself that she is a “human animal,” Odell once again acknowledges the animality within humans, while also viewing herself as part of her surroundings (00:37:10-00:37:12).

At the end of Berger’s essay, he implicitly asks: as we marginalize animals physically and culturally, aren’t we essentially also marginalizing ourselves? In the twenty-first century, the question now becomes: by pursuing ever more productivity, information, and connections, aren’t we further isolating ourselves and sacrificing our free will? When Odell suggests that we do nothing, prioritizing self-preservation and maintenance over production, she invites us, her audience, to reflect on the kind of

future we want. Now, I begin to understand what Odell means when she says that “doing nothing teaches us how to listen” (00:40:37-00:40:39). The productive mindset and “inhuman” speed with which we consume the information recommended to us on platforms aggressively occupy us, draining our energy for meaningful interpersonal connections. Yet even when we try to do nothing, are we truly able to reconnect to the world and others? Or are we still worrying about accomplishing something when we do nothing, just like I was when I stared through my own *Sky Peshier, 2005*? While doing nothing and reflecting on what is around us might be the first step, the current situation seems to tell us that there’s a long way to go to get back “what we will.”

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