

# Why we wait

Ellen Mara de Wachter

Four artists leave the city for a three-week stay in the Mojave Desert. They have instructed those they've left behind to download a customised application called Field Broadcast onto their computers and to listen out for the ringing of a bell. The artists don't know exactly what they will do once they reach the desert, except that they will transmit a live field broadcast each day for 14 days, using the app to reach their audience. The artists have accepted that they will have to wait and see what the lay of the land suggests to them. Who knows how comfortable they are with their unknowingness?

It's 8.04 on a Sunday night in London, and I'm feeling uncertain, under pressure to perform new ideas in writing, reaching for something that won't yet give itself. I suppose I might be just about poised to set something down, when my ears begin to ring. As the high-pitched tone travels through the room, I doubt my own senses. Did I leave something on; is something broken? The ringing gives way to the rushing sound of a live broadcast as a new window opens up on my computer screen and shines the light of the desert into my eyes.

A valley slopes into the centre of the image, cut out against a live blue sky. A desert pathway, picturesque in its gentle curves, leads my eye off into the distance. In the Mojave Desert, a man is sweeping his way to the left, crossing the path as he does so, and then sweeping his way to the right. Birds sing, the open space of the desert draws me in, the scratchy sound of the broom, as its fibres encounter endless grains of sand, brings me back to an awareness of the action. The sweeper's body curls forward, the brim of his hat obscuring his face. He continues his brushstrokes for nearly half an hour, leaving in his wake a smoothed path as he disappears around the bend. His reality is gritty, but from where I'm looking, a high definition image of the path looks as though it has just been smoothed over with a digital brush. I notice a stone on the otherwise clear path; now it's a skull. I blink and I'm there with the stone. The desert does funny things to your eyes.

Right after the broadcast, I'm visited by the memory of a neon sculpture by Bruce Nauman, another artist who left the city for the wide open plains of North America. In spiralling blue neon letters, Nauman's sculpture reads: the true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths.

If this is correct, then was a mystic truth just revealed to me? As a feat of endurance, the action of sweeping the long sandy path reminded me of long-distance running. In its exactness, it resembled the practice of maintaining a Zen garden, in which monks ritually rake gravel around set stones to represent the ripples of water. But monks don't perform to camera, and in any case, I happen to know the performer is not a monk. Does the mystic truth lie in the action's apparent futility? People and their vehicles; animals and their prey; wind, rain and time are bound to disturb the sand before long. Or does the truth lie in the way the action evokes other, past, sweepings?

These days, homeowners in the desert rake the sand in their front gardens to tidy it of detritus and to make it look neat. But raking the desert in this way is not simply a matter of gardening; it's about more than just introducing daily order into an extravagant wasteland. In taming their tiny portion of the desert, homeowners are engaging in a long tradition of transforming the terrifyingly sublime into the pleasingly beautiful. Beyond the sand and gravel in their front gardens, they are managing their own anxieties over the unmanageable wilderness that surrounds them.

In the era of the homesteaders following the Homestead Act of 1863, which made parcels of federal land in the western United States available for adult American citizens to settle, raking one's sandy front yard served a different purpose: it helped homesteaders ascertain the presence of local forms of life. Making tabula rasa of the land surrounding their home before bedtime meant that any overnight trespassers, human or animal, would leave tracks in the dark that could be read the next morning as so many calling cards.

The desert is often compared to a projection screen, a plane surface onto which we project our hopes, dreams and terrors. When it constitutes a homesteader's front yard, the desert is perhaps closer to the space of a dream; an infinite, malleable, and sometimes haunting world into which we slip with sleep, and in which the unconscious mind performs its most instinctual wishes. But even as sleep holds us captive, the ability to rest in uncertainty and to wait for a potential foe to make itself manifest is not so easily attained.

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'Just Do It', 'Do-or-Die', DIY – wherever we look, we are exhorted to do, to act, in the unspoken aim of producing results and, of course, of avoiding at all costs the failure that results from doing nothing. In most spheres, inaction is considered anathema to success. We rehearse the credence that 'practice makes perfect', that ideas come through doing. But what if we acknowledged that sometimes success arrives, not through a process of doing, but as the result of not-doing?

Ten days after the sweeping broadcast, I catch another of the artists' daily missives from the desert. This time, a hand holding a small harmonica reaches into frame from the right side of the screen, as though it belonged to my own right arm reaching into the vast space depicted onscreen. The harmonica is silhouetted against a clear blue sky, which gives little away about the powerful wind that buffets the hardy bushes on the ground and causes the hand to sway and constantly readjust its position. While everything else waits where it is, the harmonica lets itself be played by the gusts, its faint trill rising over the bassy, throbbing sound of the wind. Spasmodically, my breath falls into sympathy with the gasping harmonica. Three and a half minutes later, the broadcast comes to an abrupt end. Something – and nothing – just happened.

In 1817, in a letter to his brothers, the poet John Keats related a conversation he'd had a few days previously, in which he'd described the chief quality that 'went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature'. For Keats, such a pinnacle of virtue consisted in 'Negative Capability, that is, when a man is

capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'. In Keats's view, Shakespeare embodied the quality of negative capability better than any other writer, because he created characters that held varying points of view and he avoided imposing any single version of the truth in his writings.

The following year, in 1818, Keats elaborated on his first mention of negative capability with a description of the feelings elicited by good – and bad – art: 'We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us, and if we do not agree, seems to put its hand in its breeches pocket. Poetry should be great & unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself but with its subject.'

Keats's idea of negative capability is seductive, not least because in the first instance it seems to let us off our own hook and free us from our self-imposed demands to produce at any cost, but also because it acknowledges the value of waiting in uncertainty.

Keats was chiefly concerned with the act of writing; a process anyone who has tried will know is decidedly physical. Hands, head, back and neck are all worked in writing; the whole body is involved when the writer paces the ground around her desk in growing concentric circles, from the few metres of her room to the kilometres of her town, and when she writhes in silent embarrassment at some new attempt to transcend a 'comfort zone'. But what goes for writing also goes for making art, and the very ability to wait in doubt, without succumbing to irritation or expediency is a prize too seldom won in our culture of constant production.

On the final day of broadcasts, the artists and their new acquaintances from the desert gather in a dried-up riverbed. They set up their camera to film the rocks scattered about the cracked soil. With the short depth of field they've chosen for this shot, the stones in the distance appear to form a soft tufted carpet. Out of shot, a woman instructs those in attendance to hold hands and form a circle. She explains that, when the time seems right, the designated 'transmitter' will initiate a sequence of hand squeezes starting with the person to her right. Each time someone squeezes the left hand of the person next to them, they are to produce an abdominal cry of 'Ha!' After the first complete circle, the transmitter will wait for the right time to start the next round, gradually speeding up the process. Eventually, she says, 'if awareness is maintained, the circle should be shouting almost simultaneously.'

One participant turns up a little late, and receives a cursory explanation. The uncertainty within the group is detectable in the awkward silences and shuffling noises, as the participants are put through their paces behind the camera. As moments of anticipation give way to scattered bellows, 'ha' turns into 'ha', until the embarrassed word accelerates into a startling and amazing chorus of laughter.

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