Introduction

Surviving Usefulness

Redemption preserves itself in a small crack
in the continuum of catastrophe.

—WALTER BENJAMIN[1]

Nothing is harder to do than nothing. In a world where our value is determined by our productivity, many of us find our every last minute captured, optimized, or appropriated as a financial resource by the technologies we use daily. We submit our free time to numerical evaluation, interact with algorithmic versions of each other, and build and maintain personal brands. For some, there may be a kind of engineer's satisfaction in the streamlining and networking of our entire lived experience. And yet a certain nervous feeling, of being overstimulated and unable to sustain a train of thought, lingers. Though it can be hard to grasp before it disappears behind the screen of distraction, this feeling is in fact urgent. We still recognize that much of what gives one's life meaning stems from accidents, interruptions, and serendipitous encounters: the "off time" that a mechanistic view of experience seeks to eliminate.

Already in 1877, Robert Louis Stevenson called busyness a "symptom of deficient vitality," and observed "a sort of dead-alive, hackneyed people about, who are scarcely conscious of living except in the exercise of some conventional occupation."[2] And, after all, we only go around once. Seneca, in "On the Shortness of Life," describes the horror of looking back to see that life has slipped

between our fingers. It sounds all too much like someone waking from the stupor of an hour on Facebook:

> Look back in memory and consider . . . how many have robbed you of life when you were not aware of what you were losing, how much was taken up in useless sorrow, in foolish joy, in greedy desire, in the allurements of society, how little of yourself was left to you; you will perceive that you are dying before your season![3]

On a collective level, the stakes are higher. We know that we live in complex times that demand complex thoughts and conversations—and those, in turn, demand the very time and space that is nowhere to be found. The convenience of limitless connectivity has neatly paved over the nuances of in-person conversation, cutting away so much information and context in the process. In an endless cycle where communication is stunted and time is money, there are few moments to slip away and fewer ways to find each other.

Given how poorly art survives in a system that only values the bottom line, the stakes are cultural as well. What the tastes of neoliberal techno manifest–destiny and the culture of Trump have in common is impatience with anything nuanced, poetic, or less-than-obvious. Such "nothings" cannot be tolerated because they cannot be used or appropriated, and provide no deliverables. (Seen in this context, Trump's desire to defund the National Endowment for the Arts comes as no surprise.) In the early twentieth century, the surrealist painter Giorgio de Chirico foresaw a narrowing horizon for activities as "unproductive" as observation. He wrote:

> In the face of the increasingly materialist and pragmatic orientation of our age . . . it would not be eccentric in the future to contemplate a society in which those who live for the pleasures of the mind will no longer have the right to demand their place in the sun. The writer, the thinker, the dreamer,

> the poet, the metaphysician, the observer . . . he who tries to solve a riddle or to pass judgement will become an anachronistic figure, destined to disappear from the face of the earth like the ichthyosaur and the mammoth.[4]

This book is about how to hold open that place in the sun. It is a field guide to doing nothing as an act of political resistance to the attention economy, with all the stubbornness of a Chinese "nail house" blocking a major highway. I want this not only for artists and writers, but for any person who perceives life to be *more than an instrument* and therefore something that cannot be optimized. A simple refusal motivates my argument: refusal to believe that the present time and place, and the people who are here with us, are somehow not enough. Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram act like dams that capitalize on our natural interest in others and an ageless need for community, hijacking and frustrating our most innate desires, and profiting from them. Solitude, observation, and simple conviviality should be recognized not only as ends in and of themselves, but inalienable rights belonging to anyone lucky enough to be alive.

THE FACT THAT the "nothing" that I propose is only nothing from the point of view of capitalist productivity explains the irony that a book called *How to Do Nothing* is in some ways also a plan of action. I want to trace a series of movements: 1) a dropping out, not dissimilar from the "dropping out" of the 1960s; 2) a lateral movement outward to things and people that are around us; and 3) a movement downward into place. Unless we are vigilant, the current design of much of our technology will block us every step of the way, deliberately creating false targets for self-reflection, curiosity, and a desire to belong to a community. When people long for some kind of escape, it's worth asking: What would "back to the land" mean if we understood the land to be where we are right now? Could

"augmented reality" simply mean putting your phone down? And what (or who) is that sitting in front of you when you finally do?

It is within a blasted landscape of neoliberal determinism that this book seeks hidden springs of ambiguity and inefficiency. This is a four-course meal in the age of Soylent. But while I hope you find some relief in the invitation to simply stop or slow down, I don't mean this to be a weekend retreat or a mere treatise on creativity. The point of doing nothing, as I define it, isn't to return to work refreshed and ready to be more productive, but rather to question what we currently perceive as productive. My argument is obviously anticapitalist, especially concerning technologies that encourage a capitalist perception of time, place, self, and community. It is also environmental and historical: I propose that rerouting and deepening one's attention to place will likely lead to awareness of one's participation in history and in a more-than-human community. From either a social or ecological perspective, the ultimate goal of "doing nothing" is to wrest our focus from the attention economy and replant it in the public, physical realm.

I am not anti-technology. After all, there are forms of technology—from tools that let us observe the natural world to decentralized, noncommercial social networks—that might situate us more fully in the present. Rather, I am opposed to the way that corporate platforms buy and sell our attention, as well as to designs and uses of technology that enshrine a narrow definition of productivity and ignore the local, the carnal, and the poetic. I am concerned about the effects of current social media on expression—including the right not to express oneself—and its deliberately addictive features. But the villain here is not necessarily the Internet, or even the idea of social media; it is the invasive logic of *commercial* social media and its financial incentive to keep us in a profitable state of anxiety, envy, and distraction. It is furthermore the cult of individuality and personal branding that grow out of such platforms and affect the way we think about our offline selves and the places where we actually live.

GIVEN MY INSISTENCE on attending to the local and present, it's important that this book is rooted in the San Francisco Bay Area, where I grew up and where I currently live. This place is known for two things: technology companies and natural splendor. Here, you can drive directly west from venture-capitalist offices on Sand Hill Road to a redwood forest overlooking the sea, or walk out of the Facebook campus into a salt marsh full of shorebirds. When I was growing up in Cupertino, my mom would sometimes take me to her office at Hewlett-Packard, where I once tried on a very early version of a VR headset. To be sure, I spent a lot of time inside on the computer. But on other days my family would go for long hikes among the oak trees and redwoods in Big Basin, or along the cliffs at San Gregorio State Beach. In the summer, I was often away at camp in the Santa Cruz Mountains, forever learning the name *Sequoia sempervirens*.

I am an artist as well as a writer. In the early 2010s, because I used computers to make my art and maybe because I lived in San Francisco, I got shunted into the catch-all "art-and-technology" category. But my only real interest in technology was how it could give us more access to physical reality, which is where my real loyalties were. This put me in sort of an odd position, as someone who gets invited to tech conferences but who would rather be out bird-watching. It's just one of the strangely "in-between" aspects of my experience, first of all as a biracial person, and secondly as one who makes digital art about the physical world. I have been an artist in residence at such strange places as Recology SF (otherwise known as "the dump"), the San Francisco Planning Department, and the Internet Archive. All along, I've had a love-hate relationship with Silicon Valley as the source of my childhood nostalgia and the technology that created the attention economy.

Sometimes it's good to be stuck in the in-between, even if it's

uncomfortable. Many of the ideas for this book formed over years of teaching studio art and arguing its importance to design and engineering majors at Stanford, some of whom didn't see the point. The sole field trip in my digital design class is simply a hike, and sometimes I have my students sit outside and do nothing for fifteen minutes. I'm realizing that these are my ways of insisting on something. Living between the mountains and this hyper accelerated, entrepreneurial culture, I can't help but ask the question: What does it mean to construct digital worlds while the actual world is crumbling before our eyes?

The odd activities of my class also come from a place of concern. Among my students and in many of the people I know, I see so much energy, so much intensity, and so much anxiety. I see people caught up not just in notifications but in a mythology of productivity and progress, unable not only to rest but simply to see where they are. And during the summer that I wrote this, I saw a catastrophic wildfire without end. This place, just as much as the place where you are now, is calling out to be heard. I think we should listen.

LET'S START IN the hills overlooking Oakland, the city where I currently live. Oakland has two famous trees: first is the Jack London Tree, a gigantic coast live oak in front of City Hall, from which the city gets its tree-shaped logo. The other, which is hidden among the hills, is not as well known. Nicknamed the "Grandfather" or "Old Survivor," it's Oakland's only old-growth redwood left standing, a miraculous five-hundred-year-old holdover from the time before all of the ancient redwoods were logged following the Gold Rush. Though much of the East Bay Hills are covered in redwoods, they are all second growth, sprouted from the stumps of ancestors that at one point were some of the largest on the entire coast. Before 1969, people in Oakland assumed that all of the old-growth trees were gone, until a naturalist happened upon Old Survivor towering over the other trees. Since then, the ancient tree has figured in the

collective imagination, prompting articles, group hikes, and even a documentary.

Before they were logged, the old-growth redwoods of the East Bay Hills also included the Navigation Trees, redwoods that were so tall that sailors in the San Francisco Bay used them to steer clear of the submerged and dangerous Blossom Rock. (When the trees were logged, the Army Corp of Engineers had to literally blow up Blossom Rock.) Though it wasn't one of those trees, I like to think of Old Survivor as its own kind of navigational aid. This wizened tree has a few lessons to teach us that correspond to the course I will try to chart throughout this book.

The first lesson is about resistance. Old Survivor's somewhat legendary status has to do not only with its age and unlikely survival, but its mysterious location. Even those who grew up hiking in the East Bay Hills can have a hard time finding it. When you do spot Old Survivor, you still can't get that close, because it sits on a steep rocky slope whose ascent would require a serious scramble. That's one reason it survived logging; the other reason has to do with its twisted shape and its height: ninety-three feet, a runt compared to other old-growth redwoods. In other words, Old Survivor survived largely by appearing useless to loggers as a timber tree.

To me, this sounds like a real-life version of a story—the title of which is often translated as "The Useless Tree"—from the *Zhuangzi*, a collection of writings attributed Zhuang Zhou, a fourth-century Chinese philosopher. The story is about a carpenter who sees a tree (in one version, a serrate oak, a similar-looking relative to our coast live oak) of impressive size and age. But the carpenter passes it right by, declaring it a "worthless tree" that has only gotten to be this old because its gnarled branches would not be good for timber. Soon afterward, the tree appears to him in a dream and asks, "Are you comparing me with those useful trees?" The tree points out to him that fruit trees and timber trees are regularly ravaged. Meanwhile, uselessness has been this tree's strategy: "This is of great use to me. If I had been of some use, would I ever have grown this large?"

The tree balks at the distinction between usefulness and worth, made by a man who only sees trees as potential timber: "What's the point of this—things condemning things? You a worthless man about to die—how do you know I'm a worthless tree?"[5] It's easy for me to imagine these words being spoken by Old Survivor to the nineteenth-century loggers who casually passed it over, less than a century before we began realizing what we'd lost.

This formulation—the usefulness of uselessness—is typical of Zhuang Zhou, who often spoke in apparent contradictions and non sequiturs. But like his other statements, it's not a paradox for the sake of being a paradox: rather, it's merely an observation of a social world that is itself a paradox, defined by hypocrisy, ignorance, and illogic. In a society like that, a man attempting a humble and ethical life would certainly appear "backward": for him, good would be bad, up would be down, productivity would be destruction, and indeed, uselessness would be useful.

If you'll allow me to stretch this metaphor, we could say that Old Survivor was *too weird* or *too difficult* to proceed easily toward the sawmill. In that way, the tree provides me with an image of "resistance-in-place." To resist in place is to make oneself into a shape that cannot so easily be appropriated by a capitalist value system. To do this means refusing the frame of reference: in this case, a frame of reference in which value is determined by productivity, the strength of one's career, and individual entrepreneurship. It means embracing and trying to inhabit somewhat fuzzier or blobbier ideas: of maintenance as productivity, of the importance of nonverbal communication, and of the mere experience of life as the highest goal. It means recognizing and celebrating a form of the self that changes over time, exceeds algorithmic description, and whose identity doesn't always stop at the boundary of the individual.

In an environment completely geared toward capitalist appropriation of even our smallest thoughts, doing this isn't any less uncomfortable than wearing the wrong outfit to a place with a

dress code. As I'll show in various examples of past refusals-in-place, to remain in this state takes commitment, discipline, and will. Doing nothing is *hard*.

THE OTHER LESSON that Old Survivor offers us has to do with its function as witness and memorial. Even the most stalwart materialist must admit that Old Survivor is different from a man-made monument because it is, after all, *alive*. In a 2011 issue of a community newspaper called *MacArthur Metro*, the late Gordon Laverty, then a retired East Bay Municipal Utility District worker, and his son Larry, wrote a paean to Old Survivor: "There's a fella who lives high up on a slope in nearby Leona Park who's been a witness to our madness here for as long as people have been in Oakland. His name is Old Survivor. He's a redwood tree and he's old." They frame the tree as a witness to history, from the hunting and gathering of the Ohlone people, to the arrival of the Spanish and the Mexicans, to the white profiteers. The tree's viewpoint—unchanging vis-à-vis the many successive follies of newcomers—ultimately makes it a moral symbol for the Lavertys: "Old Survivor still stands . . . as a sentinel to remind us to make our choices wisely."[6]

I see him the same way. Old Survivor is above all a physical fact, a wordless testament to a very real past, both natural and cultural. To look at the tree is to look at something that began growing in the midst of a very different, even unrecognizable world: one where human inhabitants preserved the local balance of life rather than destroying it, where the shape of the coastline was not yet changed, where there were grizzly bears, California condors, and Coho salmon (all of which disappeared from the East Bay in the nineteenth century). This is not the stuff of fable. Indeed, it wasn't even that long ago. Just as surely as the needles that grow from Old Survivor are connected to its ancient roots, the present grows out of the past. This rootedness is something we desperately need when

we find ourselves awash in an amnesiac present and the chain-store aesthetic of the virtual.

These two lessons should give you a sense of where I'm headed in this book. The first half of "doing nothing" is about disengaging from the attention economy; the other half is about reengaging with something else. That "something else" is nothing less than time and space, a possibility only once we meet each other there on the level of attention. Ultimately, against the placelessness of an optimized life spent online, I want to argue for a new "placefulness" that yields sensitivity and responsibility to the historical (what happened here) and the ecological (who and what lives, or lived, here).

In this book, I hold up bioregionalism as a model for how we might begin to think again about place. Bioregionalism, whose tenets were articulated by the environmentalist Peter Berg in the 1970s, and which is widely visible in indigenous land practices, has to do with an awareness not only of the many life-forms of each place, but how they are interrelated, including with humans. Bioregionalist thought encompasses practices like habitat restoration and permaculture farming, but has a cultural element as well, since it asks us to identify as citizens of the bioregion as much as (if not more than) the state. Our "citizenship" in a bioregion means not only familiarity with the local ecology but a commitment to stewarding it together.

It's important for me to link my critique of the attention economy to the promise of bioregional awareness because I believe that capitalism, colonialist thinking, loneliness, and an abusive stance toward the environment all coproduce one another. It's also important because of the parallels between what the economy does to an ecological system and what the attention economy does to our attention. In both cases, there's a tendency toward an aggressive monoculture, where those components that are seen as "not useful" and which cannot be appropriated (by loggers or by Facebook) are the first to go. Because it proceeds from a false understanding of life as atomized and optimizable, this view of usefulness fails to

recognize the ecosystem as a living whole that in fact needs all of its parts to function. Just as practices like logging and large-scale farming decimate the land, an overemphasis on performance turns what was once a dense and thriving landscape of individual and communal thought into a Monsanto farm whose "production" slowly destroys the soil until nothing more can grow. As it extinguishes one species of thought after another, it hastens the erosion of attention.

Why is it that the modern idea of productivity is so often a frame for what is actually the *destruction* of the natural productivity of an ecosystem? This sounds a lot like the paradox in Zhuang Zhou's story, which more than anything is a joke about how narrow the concept of "usefulness" is. When the tree appears to the carpenter in his dream, it's essentially asking him: Useful for what? Indeed, this is the same question I have when I give myself enough time to step back from the capitalist logic of how we currently understand productivity and success. Productivity that produces what? Successful in what way, and for whom? The happiest, most fulfilled moments of my life have been when I was completely aware of being alive, with all the hope, pain, and sorrow that that entails for any mortal being. In those moments, the idea of success as a teleological goal would have made no sense; the moments were ends in themselves, not steps on a ladder. I think people in Zhuang Zhou's time knew the same feeling.

There's an important detail at the beginning of the useless tree story. Multiple versions of it mention that the gnarled oak tree was so large and wide that it should shade "several thousand oxen" or even "thousands of teams of horses." The shape of the useless tree does more than just protect it from the carpenter; it is also the shape of care, of branching out over the thousands of animals who seek shelter, thus providing the grounds for life itself. I want to imagine a whole forest of useless trees, branches densely interwoven, providing an impenetrable habitat for birds, snakes, lizards, squirrels, insects, fungi, and lichen. And eventually, through

this generous, shaded, and useless environment might come a weary traveler from the land of usefulness, a carpenter who has laid down his tools. Maybe after a bit of dazed wandering, he might take a cue from the animals and have a seat beneath an oak tree. Maybe, for the first time ever, he'd take a nap.

LIKE OLD SURVIVOR, you'll find that this book is a bit oddly shaped. The arguments and observations I'll make here are not neat, interlocking parts in a logical whole. Rather, I saw and experienced many things during the course of writing it—things that changed my mind and then changed it again, and which I folded in as I went. I came out of this book different than I went in. So, consider this not a closed transmission of information, but instead an open and extended essay, in the original sense of the word (a journey, an essaying forth). It's less a lecture than an invitation to take a walk.

The first chapter of this book is a version of an essay I wrote in the spring following the 2016 election, about a personal state of crisis that led me to the necessity of doing nothing. In that chapter I begin to identify some of my most serious grievances with the attention economy, namely its reliance on fear and anxiety, and its concomitant logic that "disruption" is more productive than the work of maintenance—of keeping ourselves and others alive and well. Written in the midst of an online environment in which I could no longer make sense of anything, the essay was a plea on behalf of the spatially and temporally embedded human animal; like the technology writer Jaron Lanier, I sought to "double down on being human."

One reaction to all of this is to head for the hills—permanently. In the second chapter, I look at a few different people and groups who took this approach. The countercultural communes of the 1960s in particular have much to teach us about the challenges inherent in trying to extricate oneself completely from the fabric of a capitalist reality, as well as what was sometimes an ill-fated attempt

to escape politics altogether. This is the beginning of an ongoing distinction I'll make between 1) escaping "the world" (or even just other people) entirely and 2) remaining in place while escaping the framework of the attention economy and an over-reliance on a filtered public opinion.

This distinction also forms the basis for the idea of refusal-in-place, the subject of my third chapter. Taking a cue from Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener," who answers not "I will not" but "I would prefer not to," I look to the history of refusal for responses that protest the terms of the question itself. And I try to show how that creative space of refusal is threatened in a time of widespread economic precarity, when everyone from Amazon workers to college students see their margin of refusal shrinking, and the stakes for playing along growing. Thinking about what it takes to *afford* refusal, I suggest that learning to redirect and enlarge our attention may be the place to pry open the endless cycle between frightened, captive attention and economic insecurity.

Chapter 4 comes mainly from my experience as an artist and art educator long interested in how art can teach us new scales and tones of attention. I look to both art history and vision studies to think about the relationship between attention and volition—how we might not only disentangle ourselves from the attention economy but learn to wield attention in a more intentional way. This chapter is also based on my personal experience learning about my bioregion for the first time, a new pattern of attention applied to the place I've lived in my entire life.

If we can use attention to inhabit a new plane of reality, it follows that we might meet each other there by paying attention to the same things and to each other. In Chapter 5, I examine and try to dissolve the limits that the "filter bubble" has placed on how we view the people around us. Then I'll ask you to stretch it even further, extending the same attention to the more-than-human world. Ultimately, I argue for a view of the self and of identity that is the opposite of the personal brand: an unstable, shapeshifting thing determined by

interactions with others and with different kinds of places.

In the last chapter, I try to imagine a utopian social network that could somehow hold all of this. I use the lens of the human bodily need for spatial and temporal context to understand the violence of "context collapse" online and propose a kind of "context collection" in its place. Understanding that meaningful ideas require incubation time and space, I look both to noncommercial decentralized networks and the continued importance of private communication and in-person meetings. I suggest that we withdraw our attention and use it instead to restore the biological and cultural ecosystems where we forge meaningful identities, both individual and collective.

DURING THE SUMMER that I spent nearly every day writing this book, some friends joked about how I was working so hard on something called *How to Do Nothing*. But the real irony is that in writing something by this title, I inadvertently radicalized myself by learning the importance of *doing something*. In my capacity as an artist, I have always thought about attention, but it's only now that I fully understand where a life of sustained attention leads. In short, it leads to awareness, not only of how lucky I am to be alive, but to ongoing patterns of cultural and ecological devastation around me—and the inescapable part that I play in it, should I choose to recognize it or not. In other words, simple awareness is the seed of responsibility.

At some point, I began to think of this as an activist book disguised as a self-help book. I'm not sure that it's fully either. But as much as I hope this book has something to offer you, I also hope it has something to contribute to activism, mostly by providing a rest stop for those on the their way to fight the good fight. I hope that the figure of "doing nothing" in opposition to a productivity-obsessed environment can help restore individuals who can then help restore communities, human and beyond. And most of all, I hope it can help people find ways of connecting that are substantive,

sustaining, and absolutely unprofitable to corporations, whose metrics and algorithms have never belonged in the conversations we have about our thoughts, our feelings, and our survival.

One thing I have learned about attention is that certain forms of it are contagious. When you spend enough time with someone who pays close attention to something (if you were hanging out with me, it would be birds), you inevitably start to pay attention to some of the same things. I've also learned that patterns of attention—what we choose to notice and what we do not—are how we render reality for ourselves, and thus have a direct bearing on what we feel is possible at any given time. These aspects, taken together, suggest to me the revolutionary potential of taking back our attention. To capitalist logic, which thrives on myopia and dissatisfaction, there may indeed be something dangerous about something as pedestrian as doing nothing: escaping laterally toward each other, we might just find that everything we wanted is already here.