

ily cere-
cahier

report to abf
don cherry
keith knox

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a part of:

Blank Forms

06

ORGANIC MUSIC SOCIETIES

REPORT TO ABF
Don Cherry with Keith Knox

"Report to ABF" is one of the few existing complete articulations of Don Cherry's teaching practice in his own voice (the other is "Don Cherry at Dartmouth: a teaching report and interview," also reprinted in this volume). It was recorded, transcribed, and edited by Keith Knox, whose interjections are set in brackets. The ABF [Arbetarnas bildningsförbund, or Workers' Educational Association] is the education wing of the Swedish labor movement and is a nongovernmental entity (often mistaken for a political party in the American press) that conducted workshops, study groups, and seminars on a range of subjects including art, music, and foreign languages. Founded by the Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP) in 1921, the organization primarily serves members of the SAP and Left parties. While there are few clear records of Don's involvement with the ABF, it is certain that he presented a number of concerts and workshops, including the first Movement Incorporated event in 1967 with Moki, at their headquarters in Stockholm. Besides the written text here, there are mentions of Don's teaching engagement in several publications: the January 1968 issue of *Orkesterjournalen* says that Don will be engaged as a teacher at ABF during the spring of 1968, and the March 21, 1968, issue of *DownBeat* reports that Don is in Sweden "to conduct three weekly seminars under the sponsorship of the Swedish government." In the Musikverket Jazz Archive in Stockholm, there are a number of recordings made by Göran Freese from the ABF Hall between March and May 1968. While these sound like rehearsals, there is very little discussion, and it is not fully certain whether these are actual workshops. There is an additional recording (released as Don Cherry, *Live in Stockholm*, Caprice, 2013) by Freese from the ABF Hall in September of 1968. The total number of classes and the frequency with which they were offered are unknown. The workshops were attended by musicians Tommy Koverhult, Leif Wennerström, Maffy Falay, Torbjörn Hultcrantz, and Bernt Rosengren, all of whom can all be heard on *Live in Stockholm*, as well as Bengt "Frippe" Nordström, Dave Woods, and a Turkish drummer, either Okay Temiz or Bülent Ateş. According to Rosengren, the workshops consisted simply of the musicians playing together, but even if that is the case and they were not led by Don, the ABF report shows that he had a clear plan for their conceptual structure.

DON CHERRY

Extended forms of improvisation.

To the elements of sound in folk music, the word folk expresses music from the people, music of the times. Collective improvisation, consciousness of phrasing, sensitivity in sound. Development of meters into the form of intensity, temperament, temper, consciousness of new meters. The element of swing.

I think the first and most important thing is the sensitivity of sound in relation to music, sound in music.

As we first began the class, the most important thing for us was holding long tones to create a oneness. Then, we developed it into holding long dissonant sounds to open up the scope of the overtones. "Ghost sounds" is a term we have used in our improvisation for the musical surprises which, originally, were accidental bloopers, goofs. Because we started from the beginning with long tones and dissonant sounds, it seemed more and more important to find the surprises, to be more involved in it, for the assimilation of them.

Class I. The whole hour's session was made up of long tones of in-tuneness and dissonance of overtone sounds, which I usually call "ghost sounds," the whole overtone series, which we shall talk more about later on. "Ghost sounds" should also be defined as surprises which are controllable; another phrase might be spontaneous control of a sound that occurs—which the instrument itself may have made, or most likely did make—consisting of trumpets, saxophones, and most of the reed instruments where certain screeches occur, or the reed might crack. But to be able to be sensitive enough with each moment in the sound of the note . . . which the long notes allowed us the sensitivity to be able to resolve into a whole spectrum of sound, which for some reason always ends up in the overtone series. Also from the bottom sound, which creates such a vibrant sonority, especially with reeds, the way they penetrate the whole body to make this feeling of the vocal when playing a musical instrument. There are certain sounds we've discovered which can cause the vibration of the whole body, as with a vocal, no matter what instrument you're playing.

In meters for instance, Lesson II—we were visited by a lecturer from Turkey—which involved different time signatures such as 8/8/4 and 9/8/4, and has been one of the main studies we have been doing for the whole semester—trying to be conscious of the time so that

we could play it unconsciously, in the way we are familiar with such times as 3/4 and 4/4, the march time. The unorthodoxness of this 9/8 time, it is very unfamiliar to us in Western countries.

KEITH KNOX

Why do you do this?

DC Because it's completely contradictory to the way we've been taught, and we find in these studies that we can really develop within ourselves by contradicting what we have been taught, to get to our inner expression, which the forms of the Western system do not do. It's more that you tune up with the technique and for the discipline of the instrument itself, but not to be really conscious of the feeling within yourself, for expression. Because the whole body can be like a chamber—and it's the same way in life, you must go inside of yourself to know the outside. In sound it's the same way: the more of certain sounds you can ring in your head, certain sounds ring through your chest, and certain sounds can vibrate and penetrate your whole body to become a sweat or a beautiful chill, things like that.

KK These are certain surprises, certain results that you can't get by the use of traditional meters because you're expecting certain things?

DC Yes, in a broader scope for this reason. We have electronics and electronics has opened up different vibrations of our body. You notice that in modern day avant-garde music, it needs a certain fullness in sound for it to really have that quality of now-ness they call avant-garde, and this is because we are affected by our present day, living in the modern mechanical world. We know of these vibrations, like a big bus passing, that fullness of sound. A saxophone player nowadays seems like he's playing four or five saxophones, from knowing the fullness of vibration that can happen in the saxophone. This is like the different musicians that come on the scene now who have opened up these other sounds that are in their bodies.

We've been working on being sensitive enough to develop our fullness, and also I must say that we have been working outside of the class very hard on the technical side of the instruments. All of us have different studies and different teachers; even myself, I have been taking trumpet lessons to develop technique.

KK

This is a result of the class?

DC

Yes, the whole object is development. After this class everyone has felt a development within, a technical development and self-development, by going inside yourself.

KK

You have discovered new areas that require more work?

DC

Yes, with Class III, about breathing and singing tones, which is important and is now part of our music when we improvise. Because of the quality of sound from the human voice, and the textures of sound in the human voice—relating them to our instruments but being aware of the sounds in that instant—for us to touch as we hear them when we're improvising, because tone improvisation, as far as I could try to explain the studies we did and my feeling of it, is all a complete surprise, but controllable, this thing of the control. The control is just as much a surprise as . . . I keep going back to some of the things I said. As before—

KK

You said—

DC

—a saxophone player's playing a melody and a certain note in the melody causes a whole different sound, a scope to happen; and to be really conscious of it, this sound is there and present, to resolve it into a whole lot of . . .

This is one of the main qualities of a lot of the musicians that we've already . . . the musicians in jazz, such as Lester Young, he was a very good exponent of that, because he could completely surprise himself. Not only from the sound of what is created, but from the sound of the development within himself, too, resolving it. And to be conscious of it, you know. So, as we see, Class III was made up of breathing exercises within the sound. Also, the sound the breathing exercises opened up for our consciousness of the music, and the loudness of sound in silence, which we were more involved in going into Class IV. As Class IV was made up of the study of collective improvisation cut off, open up silence; in space, in time, spaces where the space was longer in between collective sound, each cluster of sounds was just to open up the silence—the example of hitting a gong and listening to it resonate and

sound, where, you know, it's eternal, from the time you were really aware of the overtone sound and listening to it, until there's no more sound, but it's your whole imagination of the sounds that you hear.

KK Is that the same with a group of improvising saxophones and trumpets and things? When they suddenly stop: Do you hear the same kind of thing? What do you hear then?

DC But that is for . . .

KK What are you trying for?

DC Yeah, but you see now, this is the thing that we became aware of. Within that silence, it's sound that is related to the sound of sound.

KK Oh yes.

DC But then, also, we can turn it all the way around where it is not related, but it is a whole music within itself, to get the importance of the silence. Then, having to respond in Class IV, we discovered that the respect for silence, you know, is something which in nature is very . . . Class V, that's important, OK? Also, between Class IV and Class V, we all visited the forest to listen to a lecture by someone from Scotland playing bagpipes, which opened up the sound of the reed and the sound of the drone, it gave a very electrifying sound, which gives us a wider scope in sound of the ensemble. And also from the lecture of the bagpipes we became aware of the stillness and the motion, the importance of these opposites is the same as with silence and sound, as the stillness—

KK Gives you the drone and things.

DC —Yes, the drone and then the motion you must feel that carries the body. This thing is to mean like, sensitive, passionate sound, how it can take the whole body and lift it. Not in the form of the attack of the sound, the musical sound, sound that happens after the silence; it brings motion just from the attack but it doesn't necessarily carry you. It depends on what

happens after the attack, you know, the direction of what sound you play.

KK What was particular about bagpipes?

DC As I said before, the fullness and the electrifying feeling of a nonelectronic instrument creating electronics. And also . . .

 I must define this word, *avant-garde*, insofar as it's the term they use for describing the type of music that we play. I would rather the word they used was just *improvised*, you know, improvised music which automatically would have a different quality from music that has been that concrete, you know. But the importance of improvised music is mostly . . . is the quality of an emotional impact as a listener would be listening and feeling each movement as being inside of him, because of the surpriseness in it. I should jump a little ahead and explain, like now, that the group has been playing, and we play for different audiences. They ask: How do you feel playing for an audience that doesn't understand what you're doing? And automatically we are reaching for this pureness, and in improvisation, where everything is just as much new to us as it would be to the audience, automatically they would feel the newness in it themselves.

KK It would be more personal?

DC Yeah. It seems as if it will be. We can take it that the quality of improvised music in folk music has really been preserved mostly in Eastern folk music, I think, because of . . .

KK Why?

DC The religious tint, the belief in . . . having a belief in the reason and the purpose, you know, of playing to a spirit that would only be interested in that newness, at one, expression in music, if I can put it that way.

KK Does that associate itself automatically with improvised music?

DC Yes . . .

- KK What I mean is music that strives for god, let us say . . .
- DC Praise, yes, praise.
- KK Is that automatically improvised music?
- DC Ah! Now we are in Lesson V, and Lesson V is where we really were conscious of our individual expression in sound, where it was necessary for us to play different types of instruments, where the whole class was made up of different new instruments. OK, if a trained musician needs to play, he's been studying and knows every note on the instrument we would play on—the class first began with us all running chromatics together, in tune, up and down to the top of your instruments, to the top of the whole sound of the whole orchestra, you know, like if one instrument could go so far in pitch, then the other instruments would go higher, and in the same way we would go down, down whichever instruments had the lowest quality to the whole range, and feel the whole technique of awareness of the technique of the oneness of each individual musician, where his only consciousness was of expressing himself, in music, to a strange instrument where every note had a newness to him.
- KK These were instruments he had not played before?
- DC Right. We switched personal instruments, where everyone just expressed themselves in their infant happiness, but having them in a musical way. Now, this is the reason, as I spoke of before, for making the balance of the musicians studying technically, to learn the techniques of their individual instruments. It was like nourishing their conception of resolving. Because this thing of resolving has been categorized in different countries. Certain sounds resolve a certain way to different musicians in different countries. This is one of the things that, by the tradition of this resolution, I feel can make a musician not necessarily really improvise his own true expression—being stifled by the tradition of the resolution of his country.
- KK You were teaching spontaneously?
- DC Yes.

- DC Spontaneous control. We were also visited, in Lesson IV, by a musician who plays completely spontaneously, which is to say that he was never trained. I mean, he would admit that he had never had any formal training, really, in the instrument and in music other than in the love and conception—from listening, which is also a beautiful growth, for a listener to nourish his conception, and by doing that, widen the whole scope of his music, which we can do in this day and time.

Forms and the feelings in form are another aspect of improvisation. Improvising forms. For example, this present-day music from Brazil, the bossa nova—when they have performances in Brazil, they would play a series of bossa novas. The same rhythm would still be going, but each person would improvise a different melody to keep the series of different forms going. Each melody they would improvise, sing, or do, would be a different form. That also extends to counterpoint in forms. Counterpoint in music is always like a movement in the same key, tonally—moving counterpoint within the key. The counterpoint can also be counterpoint between keys, which is the different sounds of keys. And then it moves into counterpoint in sounds, especially if we live in a big city.

You sit and you hear all these sounds, and you hear each one of them as it moves. You hear them consciously and unconsciously, and the point in Lesson VI was where we were standing in different parts of the room and everyone was improvising in the sound and in the song of their own, where they collectively played at the same time to create a whole counterpoint in sound which is . . . musicians must listen. The musician I'm speaking of is Bengt Nordström. He has this belief in the importance of what he's doing: it was important for everyone to really have their fullness of expression, because you can have so much respect for other musicians that you'll just play with them, which is beautiful. But you can have this importance in your song, like we say in jazz terms: play your song. You play your song, and you can all play it together in collective counterpoint to create a wholeness in sound, and that's something I think is very important. I should define this word "form." To me, form is a whole complete breath—and it is a beginning, and true, absolute form will have the feeling of rising where there is no end. The next—what you

would consider an “in”—would be another beginning. But it is a whole sequence of phrases: a whole sentence, completeness. And this feeling of an attack or a beginning, we could say the quality of this beginning, sounds so complete that it is a wholeness within itself, until the next beginning, and they connect with ascending, you know; each one is ascending from the other, and I think this has been an important fact in collective improvisation. And also, we must realize that to keep the balance, we have been learning different melodies that we have been working on from the beginning of class. Now this is another thing, of reaching—we had these certain melodies we’d been also reading, these notations which have come about, that are the only way these melodies have reached wholeness within themselves, are there for the musician, first to be conscious of every phrase within the whole composition, to have control over this phrase, and also to be able to memorize it without the music. Then it’s a part of you, as a song you can sing. Because there, we’re using certain bands where you can hear that quality of reaching, of the tension of just reading, of keeping in step, we shall say, which, also in rhythm, we have found this independence of rhythms—it’s what makes true sound in rhythm.

KK Have you overcome this by some means of notation or memorizing?

DC As I was saying, before the composition we had been studying, by the end of the class we all had them memorized. Each time we would play the composition, it would have a difference in sound and texture because of us realizing that it’s the toneness, in knowing a composition and in expressing and phrasing this composition—knowing it well enough to play the same composition as you would the day before. Otherwise I would play the same notation, each time taking up a different form, and that’s because of your feelings being different. Different period, different time, and you are more aware, you know, and reaching for more brilliance in it, you know, and more sensitivity each time, and that’s the same way as I feel about the importance of melodies as a message, and a unity in love with the musicians, and I didn’t find it confining at all. It is this thing of playing a theme—we’d get to the point in the class where each theme was as an interlude, where that, after the theme is not . . . this is where we are not improvising from the

theme but starting another beginning, which is a theme within itself, you know. Usually it's been, like, you play a theme, you improvise from the theme, and then you play. Take the theme again—well, it's only a very few musicians who can do that. Lots of discs that I've heard are where the theme itself has been more brilliant and dominating than the improvisation itself, and that's why the quality of these themes is important for the quality of the improvisation, you know, and to play a very good theme; then, when you improvise, the improvisation ascends so that it's not necessary to play the theme again, you know, really, because it's the binding of the book, but it can be a very small book or a large volume.

Ah, we're on to Lesson VII, where we were visited by some musicians from India: a tabla player and someone who sang, gave illustrations on the piano, certain scales. Also in the class, during this whole period we had been studying different scales and we became aware that each scale is an instrument within itself and in musical terms it is like a mode or a motif but—

KK Western modes you're talking about?

DC No, Eastern scales. We did not study any Western scales because you have all that in class, and we found that in studying scales in the Western concept of teaching, someone is to play the scale the same way each time. Then, you know, you can play the scale if you can hear it before you play it.

KK There are many Eastern scales that you can't play on fixed pitch instruments—did that hang you up?

DC Well, we haven't really got that advanced into it, but we have found that there are scales, and from knowing the scale and maybe a melody, we would learn a scale and we would run the scale, and we would find certain cushions, drones, certain sounds in the scale, and then each one of us would try to create a melody within the scale ourself. This is the work we would do to create a melody from the scale, and then to improvise and move in the scale and keep it rising, now that's the thing. I'll give an example: even in jazz, a composer like Thelonious Monk, his melodies are so strong and of such good quality that very few musicians can really improvise from the scale. I

mean, from the melody, because ordinarily you would improvise from the chords, when you improvise bebop or modern jazz—you would improvise from the chords after you have the melody. But with Thelonious Monk's themes you must improvise from the melody and still know the chords to know the completeness of it.

KK You mean Thelonious Monk forces that on you?

DC Yes, and there's very few musicians I have heard who can play his compositions as well as he can—to improvise on any of them, after the theme.

KK Is that true of any material when it gets sufficiently strong?

DC Yes. I mean, the right quality for good material. Especially if it's a new form—some of the melodies he's written are made from old forms, such as blues or rhythm—but also if you have a completely new unorthodox form.

 We've been studying the music from Turkey in 9/8 time, and we've found out the importance of knowing the whole melody—everyone knowing the melody—and this is the same way I learned from playing with Ornette. It's like, when you know the melody, and it's maybe an unorthodox number of bars or something, but knowing the melody—everyone can make the accents, even play rhythm around it. Our rhythm section, we all studied rhythm, we've been studying coloring themes with rhythm, and that's what I mean, of knowing the melody such that you can play even unorthodox rhythms naturally. I wish I didn't have to use the word unorthodox because it's natural. I mean, playing natural rhythms and still knowing them enough to make the certain definite accents which bring in that togetherness, that love. And music: it's beautiful. I mean Indian music. We heard this singer, we played the drone while he would sing, to feel the texture. I mean the texture which is important in Indian music, the texture or touch that they have—and as I said, long tones make you more sensitive to that. And by us playing the long tones behind him singing the scale, we could get sensitive to these textures.

 Now, one of the most important factors of us beginning this class and everyone feeling . . . of the musicians being aware of the importance of timing—the class would maybe be

one or two hours, but everyone was very aware in a sacred way of this one or two hours, and so it got to where we would come in and warm the instruments up, and then we were all set to play before reaching this musical trance. We would all first sit and listen to the silence before playing. Then we would start our breathing, as the silence was going on, and then we would begin to play, and this trance, and the importance of this time, was sacred for us, to fulfill every musical minute that we played—and that was after Class III or IV: everyone would be there on time, all during the winter. We were all dedicated to this sacredness of the time, of this hour and, even more so, now, when we perform, of realizing the sacredness of being in tune with our own body, in which to make our own personal expression.

KK This is to make every moment important?

DC Yes, and then you put that kind of quality on each note in each phrase. I mean, if you didn't really feel that phrase you would just sit and listen, to hear the right sound to make. And putting that kind of value on each note is like, in India, which I keep speaking of, it's important because of the music being ninety percent improvised.

Electronics to me is artificial—just electronics itself—and then electronic music is artificial, because most of the music you hear is someone in electronics imitating something that they've heard from electronics, and electronic music is a big race to create different sounds, and all these sounds are electronic-mechanical sounds, because that's the only way it can be because it's electronic. I mean, in music that you play that is being created on a sensitive instrument—the most sensitive instrument is the throat. The next most sensitive instrument is from percussion and then you get into breathing, the winds and things. But this quality I feel that we must pursue in improvised music is important and especially for human compassionate emotion, being sensitive to music. It's usually been in melody or rhythm: they can stir the thing in the human body of who you are, or completely disconnect you. This is a fact of what music can really do to the whole soul, the whole body, because it makes a whole beginning, and more awareness of this eternal search in developing the part. So, out of all the compositions that we have been studying, in

the last classes, we were also visited by a very good folk singer. Bengt [Nordström] also sang songs which had a very dramatic quality, and drama in music as well—it's programmatic in a sense. But I think some of the forms of drama are important for making a whole larger realm, when it's done with very good taste in forms. That's what I'm saying, and that's why, now, I think things are more operatic and symphonic in form; that's one thing that I've been involved in, extending forms. And it's nothing new, it's just a preserving of the absolute quality of the old, and some of the important things that we have seen.

I mean, an important word that we should bring up is this infant happiness, which is like a dedication to the absolute. And the human sensitivity, the naturalness of human senses.

KK This has to do with improvisation?

DC Yes, it really does, because especially this thing of contact between musicians as they play, usually when you hear two musicians play together, they are so in tune with each other that each one is playing the other one's instrument to make a oneness, and when you have more than two musicians—we were involved with seven and sometimes more—there had to be one thing that they all believe in. With us it's been like preserving the quality of improvisation in individual at-one-ment.

KK This is desperately important, because this is why you're doing it.

DC Yes, and also we have been studying this drone, which has been very important with us, this one sound. And building from that sound and making sound within that one sound as a surprise—suddenly we are all in this one sound and then us building the distance from the sound, like a trip, traveling to come back to this drone, it's a surprise.

Also, it's this atonality, playing atonal sounds that are nonmelodic. To me, that's what electronics is—this surprise in sound, in atonality, and it's very still. To me, that's very still. It's an important way because it exists, you know, the stillness. Where each sound is a melody within itself no matter the length of the sound. But I don't believe in mixing them: that's one type of counterpoint that I don't, maybe. . . . In atonal music I've heard, we have done some things in the class where we're having a rhythm playing so strong, rhythmically, that

the atonal sounds come in, but the intensity of the rhythm is still traveling, still penetrating.

KK So, in other words, if you have atonal music of the electronic music variety, if it has momentum, it will carry it through for certain while, but rhythm is the way to do that?

DC Well, for me, atonal music is Western—it's completely Western. I mean, I'm saying that and not putting it down as a definite fact. But still, again, you could say like there's nothing more atonal than Indian music, because of them using more notes and semitones. But they use it in a very expressive way, and there are composers in atonal music that use it as expressively as in that sound. I am, musically, my scope being broad enough with different types of music and sound to hit different sound pictures, where each one is holding its own in a concrete sound, that each one is like a color, a smell, different from each other. To me, that is a differentness of surprise to make an emotional impact on the natural flow of life in sound. Unnatural natural.

KEITH KNOX is a physicist and jazz critic from England. In addition to conducting important early interviews with Don Cherry and authoring major articles on him, Knox helped Cherry to assemble his resume and write grants in the 1970s.

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Blank Forms is a nonprofit
organization dedicated to supporting
emerging and underrepresented artists
working in a range of time-based
and interdisciplinary art practices,
including experimental music,
performance, dance, and sound art.
We aim to establish new frameworks
to preserve, nurture, and present to
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Avant-garde jazz trumpeter Don Cherry and textile artist Moki Cherry (née Karlsson) met in Sweden in the late sixties. They began to live and perform together, dubbing their mix of communal art, social and environmentalist activism, children's education, and pan-ethnic expression "Organic Music." *Organic Music Societies*, Blank Forms' sixth anthology, is a special issue released in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name devoted to the couple's multimedia collaborations. The first English-language publication on either figure, the book highlights models for collectivism and pedagogy deployed in the Cherrys' interpersonal and artistic work through the presentation of archival documents alongside newly translated and commissioned writings by musicians, scholars, and artists alike.

Beginning with an overview by Blank Forms Artistic Director Lawrence Kumpf and Don Cherry biographer Magnus Nygren, this volume further explores Don's work of the period through a piece on his *Relativity Suite* by Ben Young and an essay on the diasporic quality of his music by Fumi Okiji. Ruba Katrib emphasizes the domestic element of Moki's practice in a biographical survey accompanied by full-color reproductions of Moki's vivid tapestries, paintings, and sculptures, which were used as performance environments by Don's ensembles during the Sweden years and beyond. Two selections of Moki's unpublished writings—consisting of autobiography, observations, illustrations, and diary entries, as well as poetry and aphorisms—are framed by tributes from her daughter Neneh Cherry and granddaughter Naima Karlsson. Swedish Cherry collaborator Christer Bothén contributes period travelogues from Morocco, Mali, and New York, providing insight into the cross-cultural communication that would soon come to be called "world music."

The collection also features several previously unpublished interviews with Don, conducted by Christopher R. Brewster and Keith Knox. A regular visitor to the Cherry schoolhouse in rural Sweden, Knox documented the family's magnetic milieu in his until-now unpublished *Tågarp Publication*. Reproduced here in its entirety, the journal includes an interview with Terry Riley, an essay on Pandit Pran Nath, and reports on countercultural education programs in Stockholm, including the Bombay Free School and the esoteric Forest University.

Taken together, the texts, artwork, and abundant photographs collected in *Organic Music Societies* shine a long-overdue spotlight on Don and Moki's prescient and collaborative experiments in the art of living.



notes:

ily cere- cahiers is a collection of texts (fragments). it is a branch of the collective *it is part of an ensemble*. these texts function as starting points for dialogues within our practice. we also love to share them with guests and visitors of our projects.

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1	the artist as producer in times of crisis	okwui enwezor
2	the carrier bag theory of fiction	ursula k. le guin
3	arts of noticing	anna lowenhaupt tsing
4	whatever & bartleby	giorgio agamben
5	notes toward a politics of location	adrienne rich
6	the intimacy of strangers	merlin sheldrake
7	the zero world	achille mbembe
8	why do we say that cows don't do anything?	vinciane despret
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