

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Medium

Letter from Sagehen Creek

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I drove into the forest without stopping at the local grocery and didn't count on the miles of unpaved road that now separate me from the highway, from the town of Truckee, California, from mobile phone service, from anything but the almonds I have in the car & my stale baguette. The Sagehen Creek Field Station manages 9,000 acres of experimental forest at 7,227 feet in somewhat dusty isolation and I regret immediately how empty my water bottle is.

In the Field Station compound, I meet Shirley Watts coming out of a tool shed without a staple gun. I set it down somewhere around here, she says, and enlists me in the search while giving me a hug. She notices a patch of tomato seeds and juice on my white button-up. That's funny, she says, I was just eating a tomato sandwich too. I definitely wasn't eating a tomato sandwich, Shirley — I think this is yours. I point out an identical stain of tomato seeds and juice on her striped button-up shirt which was transferred in our embrace. She laughs and removes some of her stain with her thumbnail. Luckily you won't be able to see much of this on my devil's cloth, she says. (Watts wears mostly striped fabrics after reading Michel Pastoureau's history of stripes, *"The Devil's Cloth."*) Patterns where

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foreground is indistinguishable from background appeal to her, together with the long association of stripes with Satan, jugglers, prisoners, and the criminally insane — Shirley's people. The bottom inch of her arctic white hair has been dipped in a stripe of black.)

Watts invented and began curating Natural Discourse showings in 2012 — bringing artists together with scientists and architects to shake loose truths of the natural world, the built environment, and the connective tissue, the poetry, of both. At first, these cross-pollinated group shows and symposia were flush with a radical insouciance; spiders were fed LSD and their drunken webs transcribed onto glasshouse panes ([Gail Wight](#), 2012). But over many iterations hosted by California's Natural History Museums and Universities, all nuance and subject has been taken over by the climate crisis. It was hard to find an artist or scholar who *didn't* want to speak or make work about climate, Watts told me, The transition to advocacy was inevitable.



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Because the science of climate change has been politicized and sidelined by less than good-faith arguments, reviving it & bringing it to the fore requires acts of advocacy that the discipline of science is structured never to need. And possibly recoils from. Which may be why climate advocates appear brash and unseemly, like self-righteous vegans. The nature of peer review and replicable findings in science means that there's no place for championing a cause or arguing your way of thinking. The data speaks for itself. Unless the data is not allowed to speak.

[David Opdyke's](#) never-ending and never-twice-the-same mutation of low-content sloganeering around climate policy showcases this process at work ("*fair and balanced*,"

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2019). Through hours of parsing soundbites (initially on NPR while driving), Opdyke built a database of political-speak around climate policy and fed the stockpile into a script of code that mutates and reorders the phrases into an unending debate between two A.I. candidates represented by two facing LED screens. They say carefully-curated nothing forever. With actual language heard on-air. To wit:

“My opponent has completely misrepresented my position! We are not here to talk about individual responsibility. Good, hard working folks built this dam together. No law could have prevented the detection of as-yet unidentified chemicals downriver. They just did what was necessary. Agencies must redirect their priorities. My opponent just has different priorities.”

The statements are so close to meaningless but so familiar in our discourse, it’s as if Opdyke has staged a Beckett play in Hades as sea levels swamp the theatre. The computerized mashups are even difficult to reproduce in text because their effect is a stun gun to the brain. The way current political discourse on climate ends up with less meaning than when it began. Which is Opdyke’s point. Nothing will be solved this way.

There is a 20-minute window of twilight where the exposure of a television screen and the natural world are balanced — and a single firing of the shutter can capture both screen and forest without post production or strobe lights. For these 20 minutes every evening I am extraordinarily busy. Leading up to these 20 magical minutes, my workload is light. And on Friday night, I sit with the artist David Opdyke in a clearing at camp while he reads *A People’s History of the United States* and synthesizes a chapter out loud for me in which Howard Zinn describes the hollow and financial nature of our Constitution; that the Bill of Rights, the meat of our humanist liberal democracy, was a last-minute addition insisted upon by the states. We revere our Constitution as a powerful founding document, when mostly it concerns debt collections, taxes, and the priority of liens. The actual heavy lifting of democracy and human rights is done by a populist, grassroots, late addition to the document. Opdyke paraphrases Zinn for me from across our picnic table, basically reminding us that unless enough people get angry and mobilized and speak their concerns in a clear, strong voice, nothing gets done. Not even the Bill of Rights. Which is part of what all of these artists are doing in this experimental forest. To a very real extent, they are re-animating data, reminding us of 30 years of climate science, an unparalleled sense of urgency, giving us the raw material for the anger we’ll need to change policy.

Watts and I catch each other’s eye during Brown’s safety talk. Did you hear that about waiting out the conflagration in the meadow? she asks. I nod. How do you feel about choosing this location for the show now, Shirley? I ask. This is the *only* place to present this kind of material, she says. If we don’t make this kind of noise, in this kind of place, why

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would policy ever change? When I had the idea to bring art to Sagehen, I first thought we would be projecting in the woods. Then I realized what was most compelling was the Field Station itself, the buildings, the research that happens here, issues of climate and the creation of doubt about scientific inquiry as a political strategy. We're making work in the right place.

Watts will present another Natural Discourse group show in the Whittier Narrows Nature Center in East Los Angeles in December of this year. Participating artists include: Chris Doyle, Amabelle Aguiluz, Carolina Caycedo, Tanya Aguiniga, Chia Café Collective, Enid Baxter Ryce, Tim Durfee, and Rebeca Mendez.