***Until it is faced…***

**9 Art Meditations by Louise Thompson for Liverpool Biennial**

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**We are the seeds (2.33min)**

Responds to: Binta Diaw *Chorus of Soil*

Key theme: Growth

Today many of us are familiar with the term post-traumatic stress – the collection of psychological symptoms a person experiences after an extremely stressful event or series of events. As a society we should learn about it. Equipped with knowledge and understanding we’re more able to support those who are dealing with post-traumatic stress. That includes ourselves.

But there is another lesser-known term that relates to trauma: *post-traumatic growth*. Post traumatic growth (or PTG as it is sometimes known) is the positive psychological change that some people experience after a life crisis or traumatic event.

Post-traumatic growth can be a feeling of personal strength knowing you can go through difficult times and come through the other side. It can be a greater appreciation of life, appreciating the value of each day, your relationships and the power of kindness. Feeling a greater connection to community, a sense of closeness to people who have been through similar experiences. A self-assured confidence knowing you can deal with future challenges.

As communities of people who have experienced collective trauma, we can feel a sense of togetherness and belonging – proud that we have survived and thrived in the face of injustice and adversity.

Healing from trauma takes time.

And it’s important to remember that positive transformation as a result of suffering is not something we want to be reminded of when we are in the throes of it. And we won’t thank those who tell us ‘whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger’ or other such unhelpful platitudes. No. When we are suffering, we need our loved ones to show us kindness, understanding and patience. And most importantly, we need to show ourselves these things too.

**Rest is Radical (3.31)**

Responds to: Ranti Bam *Ifa* sculptures

Key theme: Resistance

In a world that benefits from your productivity, rest is a radical act of resistance. We live and work under systems that are detrimental to our mental health – white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism. These systems and structures make it difficult for many of us to not only reach our full potential, but also to live healthy lives. Resistance and rebellion against the systems can include the simple, but yet significant, act of rest. Take a seat at one of these stools and rest a while with me.

We constantly strive to keep up with the fast pace of modern living when really humans are only built to go as fast as nature. Capitalism has convinced us that everything is urgent; so we send emails at night, skip lunch breaks and work later. It is tempting not to rest because we think we will produce more, but the truth is what we produce is never as good. When we do have rare moments of inactivity in our day, we unconsciously reach for our phones to fill it. When really we could use those 30 seconds to… well, rest. To take a breath. To pause. Be still. If we did, our bodies and minds would thank us for it.

Rest is not just something that is nice to do but it is actually essential for our resilience. To repair and heal from social injustice we must rest. This enables us to get back up again and continue the resistance against social structures intent on holding us back.

Rest can be physical, mental, emotional and spiritual.

Rest can look like play. Being in flow and finding we’ve lost all track of time because we are engaged in an activity that makes our soul sing.

Rest is welcoming moments of joy and slowing down enough to savour the pleasure we derive from them.

Rest can feel like a profound sense of self-acceptance, no longer striving for the standards that others impose on us.

Rest is allowing ourselves and others to be imperfect and recognising that imperfection is part of the human condition.

Rest is stepping back from the beliefs we grew up with which only cause us to feel shame.

Rest can mean saying no. No, I will not deny my body and mind rest today. No, I will not carry the weight of your judgements today. No, I will not sacrifice my wellbeing for people who devalue my humanity. No I will not go against my true self to be who you want me to be.

Not today.

Today, I say no.

**Yindyamarra and the power of slow (2.44)**

Responds to: Brook Andrew, *NGAAY/SEE*

Key theme: Care and resistance

The aboriginal philosophy Yindyamarra is central to artist Brook Andrew’s work. Yindyamarra is a way of living; it speaks of respect, kindness, gentleness and learning to do things slowly.

The art of going slowly is not something we value in the 21st century. In today’s demanding modern world, we seek speed and convenience, delight in the latest time-saving life hack as we multi-task our way from sunrise to sunset. We haven’t got time to go slowly, or so we tell ourselves.

The promise of all this wonderful technology was that we would have more time… but it doesn’t seem to have quite worked out that way, has it?

We have busy lives and the reality is that many us can’t go slowly. We have jobs with deadlines, children who need to get to school on time, things to do and people to see. But, what would it be like to do just one thing a day slowly?

To give your full attention to one action. Slowing down to notice it. A simple, everyday task. Brushing your teeth, perhaps. Or making a cup of tea. Walking to the bus stop. Just one daily task where there are no distractions, you don’t rush or multi-task and you take your time.

Try it for a week and notice how it feels to *go slowly*. Do you experience feelings of frustration, restlessness or boredom? Or perhaps you find it quite curious, grounding even. Do you feel differently on different days?

You will inevitably get distracted during the slow act, it’s only natural, but when this happens simply escort your attention back again to the task. And begin again.

Focus. Be curious.

One act. Going slowly.

**Noli Timere; Don’t Be Afraid (4.00)**

Responds to: Isa do Rosário, *Dança com a Morte no Atlântico*

Key theme: Loss

Loss, grief, pain… if you’re human, there’s no escaping them.

Grief is the natural response to loss and it is a complex emotional process. Intense, overwhelming and transformative. We change as a result of grief. We learn to live with the loss but we never truly go back to being the same person we were before it.

How people deal with loss has been studied and written about for many years. Most famously, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in the 1960s first wrote of its five stages: shock and denial, bargaining, sadness, anger; and the fifth and final stage, acceptance. Although people deal with grief in different ways, we all pretty much go on the same ride. We are not alone in our grief although it can feel like we are. It is a universal human experience, and nothing reminds us more that we are human than the indescribable pain of loss.

Grief is physical. We feel it in our bodies – a heaviness in our chest, the lump in our throat the immense tiredness at the end of day from bravely carrying the weight of it.

We don’t choose when to feel these emotions. Grief has its own schedule. Grief chooses us and when it does, we are powerless to stop it. To our embarrassment we may find ourselves crying in the supermarket aisle or surprise ourselves by how loudly we raged at the parking meter. Later we reflect and suspect that the rage was about something else entirely. The anger of having to feel this pain.

And the thing about painful emotions is... we don't like them. We try to change them, numb and push them away, or fix them; when we would be wise to just let them be. Let ourselves feel whatever it is we’re feeling. Sounds simple, doesn’t it? It’s not, I know.

Reflect on the role of loss in this year’s Biennial. As well as its role in your own life. When have you experienced it? Who or what helped you get through?

Perhaps you are grieving right now, listener. If you are, be gentle with yourself. Be patient. Don’t be afraid. Although it can seem like you will never feel joy or curiosity again, you will. One day you may even forge meaning from this pain.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross wrote: *The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths.*

**Healing (3.22)**

Various artworks - Tate?, Bluecoat, Tobacco Warehouse Cotton Exchange, VG&M

Key theme: Healing/Kindness/Compassion

From the day we are born to the day we die the kindness and compassion of others has a huge impact on our wellbeing. Research has shown that the physical touch of a loved one stimulates the hormone oxytocin in our bodies. Oxytocin is sometimes known as the cuddle chemical: it lowers our blood pressure, reduces anxiety and even boosts our immune system. In other words, kindness helps us heal.

Artists have explored the concept of healing in many of the works in this space - they hold up to the light the wounds created from the dark, painful histories of colonialism. These artworks, quite rightly, demand that we reflect on its shameful legacy and think about how we, as a society, might move towards a place of healing.

When it comes to healing on an individual level and recovering from life’s typical bumps and bruises – kindness is key. It’s not simply the kindness that others show us that is important, but also the kindness we show ourselves.

Self-kindness is something many of us struggle with and there are lots of different reasons why that might be. Being overly self-critical might feel more comfortable and familiar and the notion of self-compassion might feel strange or even wrong.

Perhaps it’s to do with how we were raised – the messages we received from those around us whether that’s our family, our cultures and communities or our religious and education systems. All of these can have a big effect on whether we see ourselves as worthy of kindness.

If you’re someone who internally winces at the concept of self-compassion, it might be a good to reflect on that. Where does that belief stem from? How might being self-compassionate effect your health, your relationships, your mood?

To truly heal we need to engage with things that nourish, support and nurture us. We need to learn the skill of self-compassion. And if we weren’t taught this skill when we were young, well, the good news is that like any skill we can start learning today.

How might you show yourself kindness this week? It doesn’t have to be a grand gesture, sometimes doing something as simple as taking lunch break or cooking your favourite meal can be enough to start the journey of more self-kindness.

Start small and build from there.

**The Body Remembers (2.51)**

Various artworks – Bluecoat, Cotton Exchange , VG&M and Tate(maybe)

Key theme: The body/movement

Emotions occur in the body, just as much as in the mind. Perhaps even more so. Feelings, if repressed or denied, don’t disappear, they just go into hiding. And the body holds them.

The theme of *the body* is threaded throughout this year’s Biennial. In many works artists explore the idea of intergenerational trauma and unpack the effect that colonialism has had on people.

Much has been written over the years about intergenerational trauma. There is robust evidence to suggest the trauma our ancestors experienced could be passed down to us through our genetic material.

There is still much work to be done in this area but there is one thing we can be sure of – difficult emotions have a long-lasting effect on our bodies. That’s why physically taking care of ourselves is so important.

One of the best actions you can do to soothe your nervous system and release difficult emotions is to move your body. Do it in whatever way feels right and comfortable for you. You don’t have to sign up for 12 month gym contract or run out and join an intensive cardio class. Doing something as simple as going for a walk each day can be enough.

When we’re stressed, anxious or managing trauma, gentle movement can be a great support. It can help us relieve tension and release energy that we didn’t know we were holding in. We humans love to analyse, critique and rationalise – all that happens in the mind – but there are just some things you can’t think your way out of. Movement can help us process intense feelings in a way that thinking and talking simply cannot.

Next time you find yourself stressed or overwhelmed by the events of your day - try to move your body. Look after it, listen to it, nourish it and replenish it.

Walk, run, dance or stretch. Whatever works for you.

Movement is medicine.

**Mindful walking in the City (3.09)**

Mindfulness practice for walking around various sites

All public realm sites

Can you take the same walk, over and over again, and each time look at it with fresh eyes?

Can you bring your full attention to the sensory experience of walking, one step at a time?

The aim of mindful walking is to focus on the physical experience, to be consciously aware while moving through the environment. To be awake to your surroundings and how you’re feeling, moment by moment.

This year’s Biennial is taking place in different venues across Liverpool, many of them within walking distance. If you plan on strolling around the city to view all the amazing art then why not make your walk a mindful one?

Here are some tips on how to do this:

First, choose a route where you can be uninterrupted for at least 10 minutes.

Before starting your walk, pause, stand still for a few moments and take a deep breath.

As you begin to walk, bring your full attention to the movements and sensations in your body. Notice each time your feet make contact with the ground. Pay extra-close attention to what your body is doing and the ways in which it's doing it.

Bringing our attention to something we do on autopilot, like walking, can feel a bit strange at first, this is natural. But keep trying.

Next, tune in to your senses. Notice the sights and sounds around you. What can you hear? Which sounds are up close and which are further away?

What colours, textures, shadows can you see? Can you notice reflections anywhere?

What can you feel? The temperature of the air on your face, the touch of clothes on your skin as you move? Can you sense sunlight, rain, wind?

If you find yourself distracted by thoughts or feelings of boredom or restlessness, simply return to focus on the movements of your body and your senses.

Keep tuning in to these sensations until you get to your destination.

When you are done, notice how you feel.

**Slow looking at art (2.51)**

Mindfulness practice with an artwork – all sites

Some things in life shouldn’t be rushed. Art is one of those things.

A recent study showed that people spend an average of 27 seconds looking at an artwork in an exhibition. What do we miss when we look so quickly?

Choose an artwork and find a place to sit or stand comfortably in front of it.

If you're standing, notice the sensations of your feet flat on the floor. And if you’re seated, notice where the chair comes into contact with your body.

Take a deep breath.

Set yourself the intention to focus on the artwork for the next 3 minutes and to return your attention to it every time your mind wanders off.

What colours can you notice? What shapes can be found in its composition?

Are there textures? What about lines, where can you notice these?

Sometimes we can have a physical response to an artwork – turn your attention inward to your body. Do you notice anything here?

How does the artwork make you feel? What thoughts does it inspire? Do any memories, connections, ideas come to mind?

Keep looking and noticing. Pay attention to it, and to how it makes you feel.

End the practice by tuning back into your other senses; the sounds you hear around you, the temperature of the air on your skin, the feeling of your feet on the floor.

**Spirit, air, wind, breath (5.18)**

Related to Belinda Kazeem Kaminski

Mindfulness practice using the breath

Our breath is the life force within us. It’s a gift to our emotions, it has the ability to harness them as well as soothe them. It’s the anchor that brings us back into the present moment whenever we feel stressed or overwhelmed by the events of our day. Science has shown us the benefits of mindful breathing and the changes that occur in the body when we pay attention to this simple act.

In this short mindfulness practice I invite you to bring your attention to your breath. Tune in to the sensations of it. Noticing where in your body you feel the movement of your breath the most.

Take a moment to do this now. Take a few deep breaths if it helps to focus.

And now let your breathing return to its natural state. When we practice mindful breathing there’s no need to change our breath or breathe in any special way. No need to judge it as ‘good or bad’. Mindfulness is about noticing your breath as it is. So just let your breath do its thing.

Some people find placing their attention on their tummy area the most useful. Noticing the rise of the belly on the in-breath. And the gentle fall on the out-breath. For others it might be noticing the rise and fall of the chest area as each breath travels in and out.

Or perhaps for you it might be the sensation of the air entering in through your nostrils. Noticing how the air that you inhale feels slightly cooler compared to the air you exhale. Or the very gentle sensation of the air hitting the back of your throat. Just spend a few moments noticing this now.

These movements are very small and subtle – but they are there.

Tune in, notice the breath, as it moves in and out.

You’ll find that while you’re doing this your mind will wander, into thoughts – thoughts about the past or future, thoughts about what you’re doing now or what you’ll do next. Sad, happy or neutral thoughts. This is natural, this is what minds do so it’s not a mistake. Nothing has gone wrong. Simply notice that this has happened and gently but firmly return your attention to your breath. And begin the process again.

Focusing. Noticing.

Returning your attention every time it wanders off.

And we’ll bring this practice to a close. This is mindfulness of breathing.