Sensory Nature Walk

Your body is a sensor—a tool for gathering information, or data, about the world around you; an instrument to understand the environment. To become an expert urban ecologist, you must train your body—your sensor—to notice different phenomena, unique aspects (maybe problems) of the landscape.

SIGHT.

- Draw how a plant emerges from the soil. Dig up the soil surrounding the plant. What does it look like? Do you find any living things? How do you think this particular soil allows, or does not allow, plant growth? Does water pass through this soil? How do you know? Do different plants grow in different soils?
- Draw a plant at eye level. What are its features? What allows this plant to grow? Is it growing in a particular direction? Towards the sun, perhaps? Or away from the street? Does it have flowers? Are there insects on it? How old is the plant? How do you know?
- Look upward and draw what you see. An airplane? Telephone wires? A tree canopy? Which are natural and which are human-made? How do these systems interact?

SOUND.

- Listen closely to the world around you; search for a "living" sound—a dog barking, a bird singing. Record what you hear. How far away are the sounds? What sounds are you making—as you stand, breathe, write, or draw?
- Listen for the sounds of nature—a running creek, perhaps, maybe the rustling of leaves. How does this sound blend with the other sounds around you? Do these sounds make you feel happy, sad, neither? Are they strange or familiar?
- Listen for the sounds of the city—conversations amongst people; tires on a distant highway; a lawnmower in the distance.

SMELL.

- Find an interesting plant and crush the leaves in your hand. What does it smell like? Does it have a smell at all? Why do plants have scents?
- Can you discern any other natural smells of the ecosystem around you? How about human-made smells—cigarettes, rubber, gasoline?

TOUCH.

- Describe the texture of a plant material. A stick, a leaf, a flower. Does this texture serve a function for the plant? Does the temperature, seasonality affect the texture?
- Find an inorganic material. Water, rock, sand, clay. Describe its texture. Are these objects located near organic materials? How does their materiality add to the environment? Dig a hole. What does the soil feel like? Is it cold, wet, clumpy? Loose and dry?

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