

## SenseLab: An interview with Erin Manning

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## SENSELAB:

### AN INTERVIEW WITH ERIN MANNING

by Aseman Sabet

Erin Manning is a philosopher, cultural theorist, artist and professor at Concordia University where, in 2004, she founded SenseLab. Conceived as a polymorphic research-creation laboratory, SenseLab is comprised of an international and interdisciplinary network of artists and thinkers who work at the intersection of philosophy, art and activism. The aim of this interview is to gain insight into the experimental and dialogical approach inherent to this collective project.

**Aseman Sabet** One of SenseLab's driving forces is the creative potential of philosophy, which is understood here as an active and effective practice. While the act of founding this laboratory as such seems to reflect this process-oriented exploration, what more specifically led you to initiate SenseLab?

**Erin Manning** In retrospect I've found myself capable of making sense of SenseLab's different phases, but to be honest, nothing that SenseLab is now was really imagined when I started it. It was 2003 and I had applied for a research chair at Concordia. I knew little about research chairs and certainly wasn't prepared for the question I received during the interview about the lab I would create. So I blurted out: Oh! I will make a sense lab! Embarrassing, I know, to have such a bad creation story! SenseLab as a name came to me because at the time I was working on a book called *Politics of Touch* and it seemed to make sense to create a site where a collective experimentation with the senses might happen.



SenseLab, *Three Mile Meal*, Montréal, 2013.  
Courtesy of SenseLab. Photo: Leslie Plumb.

When I was offered the position, I started to rethink SenseLab's concept. My interest wasn't actually in gathering people around technology to explore the senses. My interest was in asking how else we can move and think and make art and engage in the political. More than anything, I wanted to create conditions for doing work that wasn't pre-planned. I dreamed of a mode of coming together that could open toward new ways of conceiving of collaboration, including a focus on the more-than human.

Half a year later, I started working with Brian Massumi and we invited Isabelle Stengers to join us for a 10-day discussion of what an event-based environment for incipient collaboration might entail. At that juncture, it was clear to me that SenseLab would launch itself through a collective event. But what would be the stakes of the event? With Isabelle, the question we most discussed was what made an event an event? What made it possible for a gathering to become more-than the sum of its parts?



SenseLab, *Three Mile Meal*, Montréal, 2013.  
Courtesy of SenseLab. Photo: Leslie Plumb.



SenseLab, *SpaZe*, Concordia University, 2019-2020.  
Courtesy of SenseLab. Photo: Leslie Plumb.



SenseLab, SpaZe, Concordia University, 2019-2020.  
Courtesy of SenseLab. Photo: Leslie Plumb.



This was the operative question at SenseLab for many years. With that question there was also always a commitment to the speculative pragmatism at work in the overlap of art/movement and philosophy. While the question of the political and of the therapeutic (schizoanalysis) were always also there in germ, they became foregrounded much later—after about 8 years.

**Although SenseLab’s program is modular, eclectic and in constant flux, are there some strategies that proved over the years to draw more meaningful or inspiring avenues in this investigation of art, movement and philosophy’s relational and pragmatic dynamics?**

**E.M.** Perhaps the most consistent aspect of SenseLab is its practice of reading philosophy through the collective reading group. In the first decade or so, we met every three weeks. Our reading practice was thought as an entryway into collective practice. The aim was not to debate. The aim was to enter deeply into a modality of thinking, to taste and touch and live it, and then to try it on, to live it. Since SenseLab is radically open, people come from everywhere. Most of these people don’t have a philosophy background. But even for those who do, the emphasis is on reading anew.

The reading is done out loud. We stay very close to the text—we rarely stray from the text to bring in other authors, and when we do, we try to articulate why we need them (rather than use them to craft a distance from the text). We read very little at a time (rarely more than 10 pages). And we take our time. This means that most books take us a year to read.

This practice of reading has allowed us to *practice philosophy*. This close encounter with the philosophical is not meant to “educate” us. It’s meant to give us the tools for approaching things differently. It’s meant to activate and detour us!

This technique is one we’ve had a hard time shifting to other registers of our practice—the material exploration and movement experimentation. There, it took much longer to find a technique that could activate the kind of transversal exploration I describe above. It seemed to be simpler with philosophy—that we could take a text, enter it collectively and pull out of it what we needed. Artistically, it was hard to find a point of departure we could collective compose around. After years and years of experimenting, a practice did emerge, however. We call it “composing.”

Composing is a material/architectural/environmental engagement with our surrounds. Recognizing that the modes of encounter of the university privilege a kind of choreography of frontality (desks facing the same direction, professor in front) that is stridently neurotypical, and taking seriously the violence of the neurotypical model of faciality that always accompanies tendencies toward frontality, folks around SenseLab started experimenting with materials to create new thresholds, new ways of entering and participating in the classroom setting. This developed into exploration of other ways of engaging with

institutional space. Often this means a space where there are tunnels and corners and holes where you can hide, areas you can tuck yourself into, softer and harder affordances. And since the space is never finished, there are always plenty of opportunities for continuing the work of composing as you participate in the class. In this way, there is another layer of conversation that takes place—a kind of attunement to the materiality of expression.

Through the practice of composing, it became possible to do a version of the work we had learned to do with philosophy: we could collectively attune to the material/incorporeal environment and move with it. Mostly this occurred without language. The composing is not about a negotiation that is spoken. It is about listening to the materials themselves, attending to angles of light, working with sound (and the ubiquitous, quite dreadful university fans that blanket the space with their incessant hum). Working across a range of everyday materials (fabric, string, paper, rocks, furniture, etc.) and the more incorporeal effects of light and sound and sense, hours upon hours would be spent crafting material/spatial/architectural encounters by *making space*.



SenseLab, *Three Mile Meal*, Montreal, 2013.  
Courtesy of SenseLab. Photo: Leslie Plumb.

While the environment that results from composing can look like an installation, the shape it takes is really just a snapshot. What's important about composing is that it's a *practice*. You can tell it's a practice by the way it wears out its form: a certain kind of constellation will grow and change over a period of months and then one day it will stop doing anything. This moment of necessary transformation has come to be called "shift." What I love about shift is that it comes from the environment. There is a day, a moment, when it suddenly feels like things have stopped composing. The form the space has taken has become too sure of itself. And so now it's time to start again.

What I love about this process is that it amplifies our lived experience of the environment. Too often we treat the environment itself as passive, bringing thought or movement or action "into" it. Here, the environment becomes an active participant in the process of thinking and moving, the two in co-composition.

**You mention that people who take part in the reading groups come from different horizons, without necessarily having a background in philosophy. When it comes to the practice of composing, how do the participants who engage in—and experiment—those processual interventions come together? Is it open to anyone, inside or outside of academia?**

**E.M.** SenseLab is radically open. Anyone who wants to participate is invited to. There is no membership—no clear way in, no clear way out.

There are many ways people enter. The most typical is probably through email—I regularly get emails from people asking how to participate in a reading group, or whether they can come for a residency. In these cases, I just add them to our online hub and that way they have access to the readings and to the timetable (and any discussion happening online). If they want to come for a residency, we just welcome them and ask them to let us know when they arrive. We are always careful, though, to make sure they understand that it's an environment of *emergent* collectivity. SenseLab is not a place to come and bring your work and presume you have a ready-made audience. It's an environment for inventing techniques and exploring modes of collaboration in the key of a minor sociality.

If the person who wants to join is local, we give them a key to the Concordia space (which we call SpaZe) and access to the others space we have in Mile Ex (which we call underspaZe). It's very simple.

Things also happen more organically. Someone might wander into the SenseLab at Concordia. They might come through a reading group or a class. They might come more often, maybe read a bit, or listen in on a conversation. And then before they know it, they might begin composing.

And just as easily as they arrived, they might never enter again. The thing about SenseLab is that it's not about "growing" something so that it scales up. It's about exploring what happens in the



SenseLab, SpaZe, Concordia University, 2019-2020.  
Courtesy of SenseLab. Photo: Leslie Plumb.

activation of a collective problem. It's about allowing some seeds to germinate to see how they can grow elsewhere. So, it's more of a disseminatory gesture than an engulfing one.

That said, many of us have been around for a while. It's not unusual to meet folks at SenseLab who have been reading and making and thinking together for almost two decades.

**Activism is often stated as one of SenseLab's main axes. How does this take shape within your activities? Does it manifest itself as an epistemological resistance to traditional modes of thinking art and philosophy?**

**E.M.** SenseLab thinks hard about how we live, and what else living can be. It seeks to not make a separation between living and thinking, or between learning and living. Philosophy today is often solely associated with universities, and with specialized

knowledge. But philosophy is not that, it is so much more than that! Philosophy is the world of questions that accompany us in the living.

The focus on the political is therefore never in opposition to, or external to, the conceptual work. Art, philosophy, politics mingle, their singular tendencies in overlap.

For this reason, the explicit focus on activism took a while—I would say that it wasn't at the forefront in the first decade or so. Many of us were very involved in social justice or environmental politics, but those engagements were peripheral to our collective work at SenseLab. And then things began to swerve more specifically toward the political. I am not sure what made the swerve happen except that it was time. There had been such close attention to the concept of the event, and as that work reached a kind of consistency, there was room to open the way toward questions that were more explicitly political and to ask how to move the event-based exploration into a more direct encounter with political issues.

This period (around 2012) also coincided with the beginning of a long and rich collaboration with the Design Studio for Social Intervention (led by Kenneth Bailey and Lori Lobenstine). The Design Studio does really important work in the social justice environment, and SenseLab was lucky to become acquainted with the ways in which they explore the question of the political, of anti-black racism, of community. In 2013, we collaborated on a public kitchen in Montreal—a year after they had done a really gorgeous public kitchen project in Boston. The event in Montreal was called *3 Mile Meal*. It took place in three adjacent neighborhoods—Parc-Extension, Mile End and Outremont. For about a year, we worked with the communities to foster the kind of relations that would make it possible to build a public kitchen and have it hosted by someone from the community, and then in August 2014, we hosted three kitchens

over three days, one in each borough. The focus was on bread—we made dosas in the Bangladeshi area, challah in the Hasidic area and crepes in the gentrifying environment of mile end (which had historically been Italian, Greek and Portuguese). We built large 3-wheel bike structures (a farm bike, an apothecary bike and a coffee-machine bike) that were used to cycle from one kitchen to another (with wagons behind for children).

Each site also had a “lack of information booth” where people could multiply their lack of information. The aim was not to “fix” things—not to find answers. The hope, instead, was to become curious about the complexity of all we don't understand.

The transversal quality of the experimentation across activism, philosophy and art allows us not to be “in” an area of expertise. Rather than trying to collapse philosophy into art or art into the political, we try to become sensitive to how each arena provides modes of entry to the other. You ask if this is an epistemological resistance to traditional ways of engaging with art and philosophy. If the traditional is here connected to “academic,” I would say yes: our hope is to open the way for modes of thought that are not tethered to disciplinary thought. But I am also hesitant here because there has always been so much thinking in the doing, so much “study,” as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten would put it. Study is in the everyday, in the interstices of experience, in the kitchens where supper is being prepared, in the doorways where the conversations are hesitantly happening in this time of COVID-19. Study has always happened. The issue is that too often our attention is turned to the discipline (and I really mean, the act of disciplining thought). Children make art all the time. They draw and draw and draw. And they ask the most extraordinary questions. I want to pay attention to where this curiosity is disciplined out of us. Where is study in the everyday? How does it move us into collective expression? What else can the collective mean beyond the 1+1 of the face-to-face? How can we become sensitive to the more-than that participates in experience?

**Erin Manning** is a research chair in Speculative Pragmatism, Art and Pedagogy in the Faculty of Fine Arts at Concordia University (Montreal). She is also the founder of *SenseLab* and 3Ecologies Institute collaborator. Exhibitions include the Sydney and Moscow Biennales, Glasshouse (New York), Vancouver Art Museum, McCord Museum (Montreal) and House of World Cultures (Berlin). Publications include *For a Pragmatics of the Useless* (Duke UP, 2020), *The Minor Gesture* (Duke UP, 2016), *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance* (Duke UP, 2013), *Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (MIT Press, 2009) and, with Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minnesota UP, 2014).

**Aseman Sabet** is an independent curator, art historian and lecturer at UQAM. Her current research explores the sensorial turn in aesthetics and contemporary art, with a focus on touch, sensory memory and synesthesia. Her most recent exhibition projects include *The New States of Being* (CEUM, 2019), in collaboration with Harvard's Petrie-Flom Center for Health Law Policy, Biotechnology, and Bioethics, and *Through the Forest* (MAC LAU, 2018), the first of a series of three carte blanche invitations, focusing on intersecting epistemologies and representations of nature and history. Since 2019, she also works as an associate editor at *ESPACE art actuel*.