THIS WAS
TOMORROW

SOPHIE MILLER

Artist, activist and Trevone resident

In conversation with Enrico Policardo
Trevone Quarry, Cornwall
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Edited from the recorded conversation.

01 Who are you, and where are we?

I'm Sophie Miller, and I'm at Trevone Quarry in Cornwall.

02 You were talking about the beavers, and about art and ecology.

I was talking about the separation between art and science - between creativity, making artwork or theatre or whatever, and ecology. It reminds me of the edge land between a city and the countryside. Those edge places in between are often where the biggest biodiversity is, and where the most exciting things happen. On the site, actually, some of the places where things have been scraped back - the flat spots - have amazing biodiversity on those scrape patches.

It feels like an exciting place to be working in that way, in that edge space, which at the moment is a bit undefinable for me, because it's not a traditional thing. Are you an artist? Are you a scientist? What label do you stick on yourself? But those are the places that have always really excited me. I studied theatre before I studied art, and became quite disillusioned with the traditional path into the theatre world. Now I do theatre, but on the street, with a mixture of people who have theatre training and people who have none. It's not traditional, no one pays to see it, it's activism - and that excites me as well. I've considered training in ecology as an extra thing alongside my artwork. I'm not sure. So that's what Trevone has given me, I guess: following ideas and concepts.

03 What's hard about being there?

The practical things of life can be difficult. Winter can be very difficult. The mud. The rain - this year we had 56 days of solid rain in the winter, and that was really flipping hard. The relentlessness of it. It's beautiful in the woods

when it rains, it really is lovely. And also - can I swear? - every bloody thing you have is wet, everyone's stuff is wet, and you wake up in the morning and hear the rain again and think, oh my God. And we don't have cars on site, so if you need to go anywhere you cycle, with the rain hitting your face. It was absolutely miserable.

But you appreciate things a lot more living on a site like that, because you're closer to nature. We walk five minutes up to the washing machine, which is in a barn at the top of the hill. I haven't come from living like this. I'm in my early fifties now, so in my late forties I had to totally shift the way I live - from chucking a load of washing in the machine while I made breakfast, then popping it in the dryer. I'm a really imperfect human. I'm an environmental activist and I try to do what I can, and I'm pretty rubbish sometimes, because I'm a human being.

Over years of activism and working with scientists at quite a high level, I've realised that in many ways our individual choices are not the problem - it's the bigger system we live in. But there's a lot to be said for congruence: we have to live in a way that matches our values. Putting on the washing, then the dryer, starts to grate on your nervous system when it doesn't match the way you want to live.

I've always loved nature, but I hadn't lived so close to it, and that's been a big shift. I've learned lots of skills. I was relatively practical, but I didn't know how to build anything. I didn't know the names of the tools - I didn't even know how many different types of screw there were. Now I know what different screws do. Useful things like that.

And it's hard. I'm not a strong twenty-something who can lift and dig loads. I'm a fifty-something woman, about five foot three, not built in a particularly strong way, and I have real physical limits living on the land like this. That's where the web of community matters, rather than seeing ourselves as single,

isolated beings. I lean on others for the heavy physical tasks, and I bring my own things to the community. We don't all have to do everything. It's good to understand everybody's roles - to understand in my body how much work it is to dig a big hole for a compost toilet, and to value the work other people put in - but not to feel I must do all of it myself, which I sometimes do. That's a challenge for me.

04 Is this the future you were dreaming of?

That's a good question. Not yet, I don't think. Although I was talking to my sister the other week and she said, this is exactly what you've always wanted - when you were a child, this is what you dreamed of, living like this. So maybe it is. But as you get to know anything more deeply, you start to see different paths for it, and where you want it to go. So I think it's a step towards it.

It feels exciting to be part of an experiment. I don't know if what we're doing is right. But with any experiment, any piece of creativity, you have to let things run their course to find out if they work. It might be that in forty years everyone says, that was a really bad idea - in which case great, people build on that knowledge. Or it might be, oh my God, they totally nailed it, that's what we all need to be doing. Most likely it's somewhere in between. So it feels like an important part of an experiment.

For my own personal dreams - when I take time to reflect, yes, 100%. […] It's probably leading me the way I dreamed I could go, because of those edge places - which are hard places to be, because you can't see the dot-to-dot of things. Earlier in my life I fell into the dot-to-dot: school, art college, graduating. I worked in film for a long time, bought my first flat in London with film industry money, then moved down here. I had children. So I've worked in our neoliberal world for a long time. But alongside that I've always had these edge things going on, particularly activism - Extinction

Rebellion, and before that the refugee crisis, sending medical aid and ambulances to Syria in shipping containers. I home-educated my children - not necessarily the easy route. So transitioning into something different has always been part of what I do.

05 What's something you really love?

Oh my God, my children. […] That's a short answer. There are lots of other things I love, but they're not things, are they - they're people. They're the most important. That's what I love most in the whole universe.

06 Anything you'd like to say that I haven't asked - something to spur people into action?

For people to spend as much time in nature as possible, whatever small part of nature they have. It doesn't have to be big, or an amazing, beautiful place. Just find tiny bits of nature and spend time in them. Be connected. It's a bit of a cliché - smell the flowers - but literally: push your face into a rose and breathe it in, feel the petals on your face and the voluptuous glory of it. Bury your face in the moss on a tree. Have those sensory experiences with nature, because we're designed for it. We need it to feed us.

07 What do you think keeps people from doing it?

We've just become so disconnected over time. Nature is free. It's not monetised, so of course it's not advertised at us - it's not designed to extract money from us, it doesn't keep the system going. And that's probably another reason it's so important to do it, because the system we live in is falling apart, and with climate change it'll collapse further. During Covid, people's connection to nature massively increased - people really saw the value of it. I suspect more things like Covid will come, and more lockdowns. Then we

went back to business as usual. But people remembering that and trying to keep doing it is really important. I lean towards my glass being half full, so I think people are still doing it more.

People often feel there's a proper way of doing things, because we're taught that - we do what our teachers tell us, we wait for instructions. But following your own instincts and finding the pleasure and the joy and the love in it is maybe all we need to remember to do.

This Was Tomorrow – Is This the Future We Were Dreaming Of?
A long-term audio-visual investigation by Enrico Policardo.
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