HISTORICAL PRESENCE IN VISUAL CULTURE
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# Questionnaire
## Response

*Lindsey french*

Questionnaire

Response

**About the Author**

*Lindsey french is an artist and educator whose plant-oriented work takes many forms, including of texts written in collaboration with trees, scent transmissions, and videos made for plant perception. She has shared her work nationally in museums and galleries including the Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago) and the International Museum of Surgical Science (Chicago), Pratt Manhattan Gallery (New York), and in conjunction with the International Symposium of Electronics Arts (Albuquerque and Vancouver). Recent include chapters for Olfactory Art and The Political in an Age of Resistance, Why Look at Plants, and poetry for the journal Forty-Five. She currently teaches as a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Studio Arts at the University of Pittsburgh.*

# Questionnaire

## Response

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July 3, 2020

Mobility and exchange appear in my work through my consideration of the material aspects of communication. I work with expanded systems of communication that involve not only humans but also plants, landscapes, airborne molecules, subdermal immune reactions, and the technological materials of communication systems.

In recent projects, I worked with Green Leaf Volatiles (GLVs)—airborne chemicals released by plants as warning signals. These register to the human nose as "green" notes. For *signal to nose* (2018) at Assemble in Pittsburgh last year, I transmitted these GLVs along with another airborne warning—an FM radio transmission of youth climate activists, with community contributions gathered and broadcast throughout the month-long project. These airborne broadcasts called attention to the atmosphere, and to both human and nonhuman transmissions.

In another body of work, I examine the communicative potential of working with the poison ivy plant, *Toxicodendron radicans*, and urushiol, the chemical contained within these plants that causes an allergic reaction for many people on the surface of the skin. In this process of material exchange, humans are not the subject of this exchange but the object for its transmission. The exchange is not *about* us but occurs *on* us, and it offers an opportunity to acknowledge not only our own objecthood, but also the agency and potency of another entity we might otherwise consider marginal (the poison ivy, and its urushiol).

I work with poison ivy for many reasons, including its maligned position in spaces of nature and the fact that it thrives in conditions of climate change. Moreover, this plant challenges and aggravates the surface of my skin. It locates itself on my skin and in my environment; it irritates my understanding of the environment. It refuses to be idealized; it demands an understanding of the image of "nature" as not pure.

**Figure 1**

*it takes time to process unintended harm.* Detail of mural made of poison ivy leaves pressed onto a substrate of lard on gallery window to draw out urushiol in the manner if the scent extraction method *enfleurage.* 2018.


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Let's consider this in the context of whiteness. There is huge societal momentum that keeps whiteness invisible, that allows me as a white person to disappear into its privilege and power. I know that to undermine white supremacy requires this kind of agitation; it requires a continual reckoning, and it also requires being prepared to lose something. In *urushiol tattoos* (2016), I offered temporary tattoos using urushiol, which after application on the skin, would provoke a rash within twenty-four to forty-eight hours for those allergic to urushiol, which would then last ten to fourteen days. Before the application of the tattoos, participants signed a waiver as an opportunity to discuss the risks, and to provide a moment for negotiation and consent.

These kinds of practices allow us to consider the limits of the human sensorium, but I also suggest that they might be brought into other forms of relationship. What if I contaminated my sense of purity by inviting others into my border? What if I willingly risk some of my own safety for the experience of knowing another? Even and especially if knowing that I might feel the discomfort of losing something? In grieving the loss of species and habitats, can I also welcome the loss of unjust power and unjust systems?

I do not want to compare a controlled rash from poison ivy to the lived experiences of institutional racism, but I do want to propose that in these small moments—of consenting to risk, of resisting a false sense of purity, of inviting knowledge outside of our boundaries—we practice what is necessary to take the larger risks necessary for transformation.

I am writing this response during not only the Covid-19 pandemic and its airborne transmission, but also during the first week of widespread uprisings across the country against police brutality and racial violence, and in the days following the incident of a white woman calling the cops on a Black man in Central Park because she was afraid. There is a lot to unpack here, but, one element of this incident was a white woman's fear, and her immediate soothing of that fear by calling on a system she knew would privilege her word. What if that fear was managed not by infrastructures of oppression, but instead by a measured assessment of the risks involved in this individual situation?

The long story of whiteness is constructed so as to tell white Americans that we are not the dangerous but the fearful. And in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, we see Americans, and especially white Americans, struggling to confront the reality of the danger of simply being present (evidenced in the insistence on reopening the economy at the expense of vulnerable bodies). Instead of reacting to fear by reaching for an oppressive system to feel safe, what would it mean to approach the risk? What would it mean to accept that there is no safe space, to realize that purity is not an option, and instead to find solidarity and form coalitions of mutual support? Not to stay safe, but to stay careful, to stay caring?

In an interview with Laverne Cox, feminist scholar bell hooks talks about the illusion of safe space, and asks, "What does it mean for us to cultivate together a community that allows for risk—the risk of knowing someone outside your own boundaries?" This is a guiding question in my own contributions to, or constructions of, social spaces. I find anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's work on "contamination as collaboration" to be a generative framework, especially in conversation with Alexis Shotwell's *Against Purity* (2016) and Mel Chen's scholarship around toxicity, animacy, and intimacy. I also look to Kyle Powys Whyte's skepticism about Indigenous and settler reconciliation, particularly related to discussions and activism around climate change. Inherent to whiteness and settler colonialism is a problematic conflation of purity and safety. For those who benefit from these systems, safety is not only assumed to be possible, but is treated as something to *retreat into*, rather than to *struggle for*. These writers undermine the assumption of safety as something that can be found in isolation, offering instead forms of social, political, and ecological coalition based in shared risk and collective work.

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