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The Art of Distancing: A Review of How to Do Nothing

Abstract

In this symposium style review, Matt Drissell (Associate Professor of Art), Leah Zuidema (Vice President for Online & Graduate Education), and Dave Mulder (Associate Professor of Education) each bring perspectives from their area of expertise.

Posting about the book *How to Do Nothing-Resisting the Attention Economy* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/the-art-of-distancing-a-review-of-how-to-do-nothing/>

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in things

April 30, 2020

The Art of Distancing: A Review of *How to Do Nothing*

Dave Mulder

Leah Zuidema

Matt Drissell

Title: *How to Do Nothing—Resisting the Attention Economy*

Author: Jenny Odell

Publisher: Melville House

Publishing Date: April 9, 2019

Pages: 256 (Hardcover)

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In this symposium style review, Matt Drissell (Associate Professor of Art), Leah Zuidema (Vice President for Online & Graduate Education), and Dave Mulder (Associate Professor of Education) each bring perspectives from their area of expertise.

Matt Drissell: How to Do Nothing offers a nuanced call to do just that—nothing. This is because author Jenny Odell sees the book as “a field guide to doing nothing as an act of political resistance to the attention economy...refusal to believe that the present time and place, and the people who are here with us, are somehow not enough” (xi). Though

published in the spring of 2019, Odell's intentions are all the more prescient and resonant in the spring of 2020.

Odell is an artist and educator from the Bay area whose work is typified by a project at the dump, spending time "photographing, cataloging, and researching the origin of two hundred discarded objects" with the findings presented in a gallery show. This desire for context reacts against a cultural drive to displace and dispose. Contexts shape *How to Do Nothing* as Odell's nimble thoughts wander in many directions, exploring ecology, technology, art, philosophy, and history. She artfully braids interdisciplinary threads to ask why we do what we do, a significant question raised by anyone pursuing a holistic Christian faith. As a result, the book is a diverse prairie where Thomas Merton and Diogenes are encountered alongside the San Clemente Dam removal project.

I began reading *How to Do Nothing* while traveling as Covid-19 spread across the country, giving the work a new urgency. At one-point Odell notes that "Most people have, or have known someone who has gone through some period of removal that fundamentally changed their attitude to the world they returned to" (9). After this time of worldwide removal—the zoom printmaking course, the Facebook Easter vigil, the twitter empathy—Odell can help us emerge and comprehend the renewing significance of doing nothing.

Leah Zuidema: Odell's version of "doing nothing" is actually quite something—she calls readers to be resisters, to notice and intentionally row away from troubling shifts in the currents of the dominant culture. Odell's primary criticism is of our tendency to stay digitally connected in all spaces and times, such that many of us live in "a situation where every waking moment has become the time in which we make our living, and when we submit even our leisure for numerical evaluation via likes on Facebook and Instagram, constantly checking on its performance like one checks a stock, monitoring the ongoing development of our personal brand" (15). Odell isn't against online communication or social media *per se*; rather, she calls for readers to resist the constant urge to capitalize and monetize their cyber connections. Odell makes this critique from the vantage point of secular humanism. Nevertheless, her critique is worthy of consideration by Christians; she rightly identifies that we live in an age where we constantly use digital technologies to promote ourselves, to get ahead, and to put ourselves first (by trying to increase our productivity and social capital). One might say that we use digital technologies to make idols of ourselves, always seeking more

opportunities to be worshipped by others in what is sometimes called “the attention economy.”

Dave Mulder: I read the first half of *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* before COVID-19 became widespread in the U.S., and the second half while maintaining physical distance and mostly working from home. Odell’s thesis seems, in some ways, perfect for this odd moment in time when staying home and “doing nothing” is an admirable act of resistance in the face of a global pandemic. It’s worth noting, however, that Odell’s vision of “doing nothing” is actually very pointed, as the subtitle of the book suggests. Her argument seems very much based on her experience living and working in the Bay Area and Silicon Valley, where so many technology start-ups are combining technical wizardry, graphic design, and cognitive psychology to try to capture and monetize our collective attention. Odell gives a compelling description of her environment with a scrutiny that reveals just how closely she is paying attention. But it’s not the start-up culture she depicts and details; it’s the birds in her neighborhood, the gardens she walks through, the different locations where she creates her artwork. Her attention is directed in deliberate ways, ways that others around her might find countercultural.

I was struck by the way she models this sort of recalibration of paying attention to the things that really matter in the world around us. I once took an art course in my undergraduate education, and while I’ll likely never be an accomplished artist, that course had a profound impact on me. My professor suggested that to learn to draw, one really needs to learn how to *see*. We need to stop paying attention to our (incorrect) mental images of objects, and start to really pay attention to the thing right in front of our faces. Odell’s chapter “Exercises in Attention” called this experience to mind for me. She has practical suggestions for learning to pay attention to things that might be countercultural, drawing on visual art, music, poetry, and a real rootedness in the spaces in which we find ourselves. I do not know Odell’s faith commitments, but this struck me as very much in line with Paul’s admonition in Philippians 4:8: “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” What shall we focus our attention upon?

Leah Zuidema: I find much that resonates in Odell's critique of our cultural devotion to being always "on"—including the losses that occur when we immerse ourselves in our devices and online worlds at the expense of noticing and attending to the people and natural world that surround us. Her emphasis on listening to others is admirable, and her stories about learning more about the birds, trees, and streams in her community have inspired me to be more attentive in these ways as well.

I also find it fascinating that like many Christians, Odell is working through her relationship to a dominant culture that she finds problematic. In chapter 2, "The Impossibility of Retreat," Odell muses that "we might be tempted to conclude that the answer is to turn our backs to the world, temporarily or for good. But this response would be shortsighted" (30). Odell writes later about the importance of "standing apart": "To stand apart is to take the view of the outsider without leaving, always oriented toward what you would have left. . . allowing yourself to believe in another world while living in this one...to look at the world (now) from the point of view of the world as it could be (the future) with all of the hope and sorrowful contemplation that this entails" (61-62). I read these words and I hear echoes of the command Jesus gives in John 17 for his disciples to be in the world, but not of the world. However, the end goal for Odell is very different from the vision that Christ casts for his followers. For Odell, our best hope is to be as attentive as we can now, to try to live the best life that we can until our days run out. In short, Odell's vision is similar to that of the attention economy, where the goal is creating the best life for yourself through your own efforts so that you can be satisfied (though she argues for doing so through attention to place and community rather than through digital connectivity). For Christians, our vision should be much greater, stretching into eternity in service of our Lord and King. Despite these essential differences, I still find much to learn from Odell about practical ways to have a countercultural relationship with digital technologies, and I commend the book to readers for that reason.

Dave Mulder: It's interesting for me to read this, Leah, in light of how I spent my afternoon today. The first part of the afternoon, I was scrolling through my Facebook feed on my iPad, and feeling surprisingly irritated as I read things posted by my friends (because everyone on Facebook is your "friend," right?). So many of the things I was reading were political, tribalistic, or bordering on conspiracy theories—and sometimes all at the same time. Feeling a little disgusted, I put some 90s alternative rock in my earbuds and headed off to pedal out my angst over 20 miles. At one point on my ride, I

paused to enjoy the sight of several hawks wheeling overhead. As I watched them circle, my thoughts drifted back to Odell's book, and the contrast between the algorithm-fueled digital view of my iPad screen...and the beauty of the springtime Iowa landscape with those feathered friends hang-gliding on the updrafts. It's sad to me that this might be counter-cultural, but getting our eyes off of screens might be, as you stated, a way to stretch our vision into eternity.

Leah Zuidema: It's challenging to consider how to "do nothing" with social media in a time where many of us are physically isolated from one another and relying on screens as a way to stay connected. Dave, your comments and Odell's book remind us to guard against the temptation to use digital technologies to "kill time" or hide from reality; these tools are better used to help us connect with others. Even then, we need to take care that we are doing so in ways that love our neighbors (including our family members and friends!) rather than creating divisiveness. Sometimes "doing nothing" in our social media may be the better part of wisdom, and moving to a phone call or other appropriately distant conversation may actually help us to grow closer to others.

Matt Drissell: In *How to Do Nothing*, Odell highlights a wide variety of art, from sun-saturated pop realist paintings (David Hockney) to month-long performance pieces (Pilvi Takala). But Dave is right in that a simple artistic process can also clarify the significance of doing nothing. Leading up to an investigation of Martin Buber's "I-Thou" approach to the world, Odell notes: "Practices of attention and curiosity are inherently open-ended oriented toward something outside of ourselves. Through attention and curiosity, we can suspend our tendency toward instrumental understanding..." (104). With the deadlines of modern life, an afternoon drawing the particularities of prairie plants can seem meaningless. And yet that attention can have profound significance. To paraphrase the Drawing 1 syllabus: "[Doing nothing] is a holy pursuit as it opens eyes to discoveries and insights into the world, deepening a love for God and an understanding of what surrounds us."