



Amsterdam
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Mescolanza (mixture)

a card collection
to connect words,
places and species

Angela Serino
in conversation
with Irina Shapiro

fig. 1 | The card collection and the books



This conversation revolves around *Mescolanza* (mixture), the project developed by Angela Serino for the School for MultiSpecies Knowledges at Amstelpark (May-July, 2022). The conversation took place on the 8th of July, in Irina Shapiro's garden in Rotterdam. It continued online and was edited in its final version in December 2022.¹

1. The School for MultiSpecies Knowledges is a multi-annual programme developed by Zone2Source (a platform for art, nature and technology) and Open Set (platform for art/design research & professional development), and curated by Alice Smits and Irina Shapiro. Together with participants and audiences, the School aims to 'explore new learning environments to rethink our relationship with other organisms and its implications for how we live together'. Launched in 2021, the second edition of the School took the form of a land-based situational research residency, a series of workshops and discussions and an open weekend of presentations, in Amstelpark. For more information, visit: <https://zone2source.net/en/category/school-of-multispecies-knowledges-all-en>

Irina Shapiro:

Perhaps, the overarching question I would like to explore with this conversation is: How did this card index system emerge, and how is it connected to experiencing the project School for MultiSpecies Knowledges? I see it as a possible model of a knowledge system that is aligned with my research curiosities, fundamental for the School's trajectory, about forms, formats, and conditions in which *knowing* emerges. It's fascinating how your research journey led you to the project you've developed. How have you come to know what you know now? For instance through which kind of forms, formats or situations?

Maybe we could start with your favourite cards or favourite part of the system. Is there one you prefer or, to turn the question around, is there one that bothers you or stands out as unsolved?

Angela Serino:

I'd say three cards stand out for me: Life, Love and Death. Paradoxically they are not the most important cards in the set, but they have become important to me now.

An important card for the project is **Mescolanza** (which is mixture in English). This card gives the title to this box and also to the entire project. I got this word from *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture* by Italian philosopher Emanuele Coccia. I read this book while I was researching at the Orangerie, and I really liked how he speaks about plants like they are some kind of cosmogonic force, which allows life as we know it to emerge. Our life, and animals' life as well.

Miscelazione planetaria (planetary mixing) and **Respiro** (breath) are two other important cards in the project, which come from the same book. The act of breathing is, according to Coccia, what makes tangible how everything is connected. Being in the world is, for Coccia, experiencing a "transcendental immersion". It is about shifting our view from the relation between one thing and the world as a place, to the relation that ties things to one another, and that constitutes itself the world. "The cosmos – that is, *nature* – is not the foundation of things, it is their mixture, their breathing, the movement that animates their interpenetration."²

But then again, if you ask me now what are your favorite cards, I'd pick these three: **Life**, **Love** and **Death**.

In the box you find 44 key-words that are each hand written on a pink card.³ Every card is followed by two or more cards of different colors, where you can read a quotation from a book or see a detail of an image from a book (on the white cards), or read excerpts of conversations we had during the project (on the yellow card), or even see a detail of an *inhabitant* of the park with a map on where to find it (on cardboard).

Together the information on these cards helps describe the meaning of each key-word.

Let us take the card **Death**, for instance.

This key-word is expanded upon by means of three additional cards: one of them is a quote from a conversation we had during a guided tour of the park with the ecologists, so it's written on a yellow card. I was really struck by what one of them said: "Death brings new life, and what's more 70% of organisms in a forest live in dead trees. Dead wood is not dead. It really has a second life". This understanding has changed the way that the park is maintained. As Alice Smits and the ecologist explained, the old trunks of dead trees are now left in the park and not removed any more. They house many species of insect and as they decompose over time new life is brought to the soil.

I liked very much this image of death as another form of matter that has a vital energy - one which is vital for the continuation of life.

Life

While browsing through some books, I came upon so many possible definitions for life itself, and was fascinated by this one:

Life exists simultaneously, but separately in the realms of physics, chemistry and biology. And consequently has no decent scientific definition. Life can be in the sense that each discipline goes into the specifics of its own discipline to give a definition of life, but its definition is connected to or are also constrained through the way of looking at the reality of this phenomena by this discipline within the discipline itself. So life can be observed, dissected and analyzed, but it is an emergent phenomenon, and may never be capable of fleshing out explanations.⁴

This quote comes from a book that was in Zone2Source's library: *Gaia* by James Lovelock, which has a substantial glossary at the end. I chose this definition of life because I found what Lovelock describes to be very relevant. He emphasises the impossibility of a more holistic definition of life that brings everyone – and different (scientific) disciplines – together.



There are a further three cards that I used to expand on the meaning of the word Life.

The second card reads as follows:

[Being] is the word, or the wording, of life itself that involves both being and letting-be as elements and moments that are inextricably linked to one another in vegetal existence. (...) Plants talk without articulating and naming – as life does. They say through shaping their own matters.⁵

And this is the quote on the third card:

What if it was all the same thing
 What if you eat the thing to fuck the thing
 To become the thing
 In order to know the thing
 That you came from and will go back to the thing
 And so I was devoured in order to be born again.⁶

Here I also like the reference to death, as a necessary step or phase to keep life even if through the shape of other elements. I like to think that if we as human beings were aware that our individual life here on the earth is only one possible form and definitely a temporary one, it would make us be more mindful of the impact of our choices.

IS:

In your cards, you don't explicitly write down the source of the quotes. Why have you decided this?

AS:

It's because I like the fragments to speak directly to you. Often knowing the author and the title creates a framework through which you read the words. Sometimes it creates a certain disposition, and expectation towards the words you read, sometimes even a kind of prejudice. I wanted to avoid that, and provide space for the words and the details of an image to touch or connect with the viewer.

Now that we are talking and I don't have the books with me, only the cards, the box works as a memory exercise for me because now I must remember the book or the source of the quotes or where I took the images from. It makes me recall the time of day, the place where I was reading the book and also what I was doing when I found a quote or image that I chose to print.

IS:

This is beautiful! You are talking about a situational and embodied relation to the source of information, rather than a tag that archives and structures a book within a collection.

5. Luce Irigaray, *What the Vegetal World Says to Us*, in: Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan, and Patrícia Vieira, *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 129.

6. Victoria Sin, *The Strangler*, in: Maria Dimitrova (ed), *Mal, a journal of sexuality and erotics*. – *Plantsex* – no 3 (April 2019), 44.

AS:

Yes, definitely. This is my memory box. But then I also wanted to share these moments, this found knowledge, with others. I had to find a way to connect the words to the books and to the experiences I've had in the park and the cards in this box became the way.

IS:

So the cards are not just a way of navigating the park through linguistic signs, they also have a performative dimension.

AS:

Yes, true and I see this performative aspect more clearly now. Since the start of the project I wanted to discuss how the language of the words and the language of the images shape the language of our relationship with nature and the ecological challenges we are confronted with. One of the questions I had was: does information we find in books help us frame our attitude towards what is non-human? Will it help us to get closer to the *other-than-human* in the park, or alternatively does it actually prevent us from changing our anthropocentric perspective and acting differently with all that is around us? I believe that the act of reading, and a certain way of reading together can be a good tactic, a concrete gesture, to engage differently with the world. What happened last weekend at the park showed me that this is possible.

IS:

I want to return to the idea of the performative dimension of the cards. In light of the destabilization of the Western canon of rational knowledge, this library doesn't exist in an *objective* form that you access through a search algorithm driven by fixed categories. It is always a situational knowledge that has to be experienced over and over again.

AS:

You can go through the box and through the books in your own time, and that's very important to me. But if I'm present telling stories around the cards – why I chose them, where the key-words come from, how certain cards are connected to specific situations or why I see them connected to one another – that is something that definitely adds another layer to what you see.

IS:

One can say that if the conditions of reading are part of this system, you eventually don't need to be there. People can make their own connections. If you leave me for 10 minutes with this box, I will start making totally different links. But I'd like to know, is it essential for you to be physically present?

AS:

Yes, it is. Precisely for the reasons I said earlier which are that I need to be present to provide the layer of stories through which I built the card system.

IS:

I have a question about the quotations you shared about the card *Life*. You said you do not want to reveal the source. I'm wondering how you deal with the fact that we encounter the quotes as isolated text fragments, removed from their original context.



fig. 4 | Angela introducing the cards

AS:

This is a good observation. I left the context out intentionally. I hope though, that through being offered a *teaser* you get curious to read more pages or even the whole book, and eventually arrive at your own favorite quote. Perhaps one that is very different from what I propose.

I've always believed that the written page is never just the space of the voice of the author. It is at least the space of two: the author and the reader. And I'm interested to multiply this concept even further: including more readers and more listeners and then to see what happens.

When I started this project, I initially had the idea to start a reading group with the other participants around one or more books that I had brought with me. However, at a certain point, it became clear that there wasn't any time for this to happen.

IS:

Was this because people were busy with other reading groups?

AS:

I had the impression that they were busy with life and work, not just with other reading groups. I felt that people were generally busy. Perhaps because it was the first Covid-free spring and there were a lot of activities, projects and presentations going on. After I brought the books to the Orangerie, I exchanged books and reading tips with a few other participants individually. I liked that a lot and it became clear that the project could be done in so many other ways. Maybe there was no need for ten people to all open a book together and all read the same pages at the same time.

IS:

So this card system came from necessity?

AS:

Yes, it was a form by which I could present the ideas first to myself, and afterwards I could share with others the time I had spent with the books and the specific words.

IS:

Why is the time spent with words important?

AS:

I find it interesting for several reasons.

Firstly, I saw the images and words in books as companion species in this project – that the 'companion species' were not just plants in the park. Often practices that are meant to reconnect us with nature are wordless: walks in forests or time dedicated to observation or explorative exercises, ask us to focus on what our body feels and to engage with our senses differently.

Personally I don't like to see words and senses as functioning in opposition to one another but rather I like to explore how they affect one other. During the project, I spent as much time reading as exploring the park.

Then, words were also an important element in the development of the School itself.

Specific words and ideas were introduced, used and discussed by the whole group of participants and the project's guests while exploring being with other species in the park.

Some key-words I use reflect my personal research and my own experience of Amstelpark, but other key-words reflect actions and gestures proposed by the participants of the project.

IS:

So the words are some sort of narrative sequence?

AS:

Yes, exactly. Some words snuck onto this list against my will. Cow, geese, ducks and species, for instance, were not initially important to me.

IS:

Is there *species* in the cards?

AS:

Yes, there is.

Species was not a word that I wanted initially to include, as I had decided to avoid making any direct reference to the title of the project. However, talking with Ege Kökel about her project this changed. Ege, who was a participant of the School, had made several attempts to get closer to a specific duck she met in the park. She even designed and made a bench for it/him. So species became a necessary word. Together we started reading some parts of *When Animals Speak* (2019) by Eva Meijer that offered interesting observations about how to negotiate space in a way that could also include the perspective of animals, in particular non-domesticated animals like geese, who live alongside us. From there, we also discussed the differing positions of Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway about the notion of species. So, this word became relevant through our readings and discussions that ultimately led to the public event where we read, alongside other participants, excerpts from Meijer's book [*Duck and Goose Politics*, Saturday 2 July, 2022].

Cow is there because it was brought up by Samar Khan, another project participant, in the introduction of his research. I was impressed with his

emphasis on the idea of what it means to really listen to non-humans, and how he used to hang out with cows that were chewing the cud in the fields. This brought me to reread Gianfranco Baruchello's writings about his experience of observing and tending cows at Agricola Cornelia, and how this farming project –*Agricola Cornelia S.p.A.*, 1973-81– was an artwork in itself.

IS:

But this is beautiful because through words, you not only create a narrative of how you relate to the School – not just a research diary, but it is also a support structure for the voices of other participants in a way. It is a form of tending to research and personalities of others by giving the stage to particular words as meaning carriers for somebody else.

AS:

I like this description, and I agree.



fig. 5 & 6 | Public reading, *Duck and Goose Politics*

fig. 7 | Poster with the collection of books and cards

So you have texts, images, experiences, quotes, all these entities. I wonder if this form of linking different elements (or mediums) is your usual method of working.

Last year I gave a lecture performance, *Configurations of time* (2021) where I connected existing words, images and experiences but this was still one narrative with one perspective: mine.

What I did with *Mescolanza* is different. Here I feel that I have created a system that can generate multiple stories that can grow over time, where there is also space for developments and real time variations due to other people's presence and interactions.

I see the card collection as a box of seeds where different stories can grow by entering into relations with people, contexts and other species.

So how do you imagine the life of this box over the course of the next year? As an annual cycle from a seasonal perspective perhaps: from Summer to Summer?

Do you want this box to grow by adding new cards? Or do you want to change the file system you have created?

First of all I'd like to play with these cards much more. In the end this box did not exist until the weekend of the public presentation and so it was only alive for 48 hours.

I wish to review the quotations and references I used for each of these 44 key-words. Some references that I used were clear since the first weeks of the project, because they were quotations in my notebook or images I had highlighted in the books. Others were selected in the two weeks prior to the launch and this process was done very intuitively. I was not looking for obvious connections. So the quotation is often not an explanation of the word but it rather suggests a relationship with the word – providing a hint towards a problematic use of it or a wider context of references.

IS:

Let's say, you translate the steps you took to create this box as a score, and you give this score to anyone to assemble a card-collection. Would you say this simplifies and demystifies the experience you had?

AS:

It would make the experiences I had useful for people, but I think it would not encapsulate all the layers: like of me going through this research process nor the interactions I had, or the conversations and changes I made because of them. So, yes, I would say it simplifies it.

If I think about a score it would definitely not be about making a box like mine, rather to read an excerpt of text or to be invited to look at a certain image under specific conditions or frameworks.

IS:

I wonder about how an artistic, design or curatorial practice operates in pedagogical terms? Or whether this is even possible?

Obviously, not every participatory, performative or public art practice can be translatable into a tool for learning, as the work's complexity can end up being over-simplified. In many aspects of my research, I wonder when a pedagogical dimension becomes possible.

You work with the library association – somewhat pedagogical, one can say – the cards remind me of the old card-based system that was used to navigate libraries. However, what we are navigating here is somewhat performative – a carefully arranged stage to tell a particular story. I am seeking the moment when it engages the audience in learning. How did you think of that moment: when and how do you allow it for the audience?

AS:

I intentionally wanted to refer to books and the card system clearly refers to a library, but it's definitely not just that.

I struggled a lot, for instance, when I had to put the reference to the keywords of the cards on the cover of the books displayed on the table. I put them there to facilitate the public even though the point for me was not to facilitate an encounter with books and knowledge. I wanted the person to sit at the table, read the cards, look for the sources of the material and lose herself in that process. I wanted to offer an occasion for an encounter with a word or an image, where the point was not just to try and find the source of the quote, but rather to navigate the material displayed in a personal and unique way, making new connections among the cards and the sources, or between the cards and specific places in the park. The table would introduce a world of fiction rather than be simply a display of references.

I soon realized that the public program was very dense with events and performances, and only one person could engage with the work at a time. It would have been too demanding to expect more people to enjoy this search process and so I added the reference codes on the books' covers and the bookmarks on the right hand page. I didn't want to be too unrealistic or demanding.

I also struggled because I ended up arranging the cards alphabetically and numerically, but I could not come up with an alternative. So in this sense, I like to think of this file system as a test because there are things that I'm open to question and explore further.

IS:

I can relate to the struggle of making a mechanism for facilitation.

I prefer hosting though, rather than facilitating, because as a host you can be messy. I resist a clear facilitation framework and the expectations that come with that clarity of facilitator-participator roles. I find them highly problematic.

For instance, with my students, I organize the work so that the content of some classes is the students' responsibility. And year after year, such minor diversion from the role of a receiver (or participant) is confusing for my students. The power dynamics between teacher and student initially introduced by the school's rules paralyzes the agency that the students have; the structure of rules about who is facilitating content and who is receiving it is so dominant, that a slight change makes the students say: oh, no, wait for a second, let's go back to the old order of things.

AS:

That was the struggle I had when I placed the box among the books and I had to explain the filing system so that people could read the rules and play.

It has its value, somehow, but on a different level.

The beauty of that is that it fulfilled another need. When I started this project I really wanted the books to be taken care of, be outside of my house, be used. I also loved that I took two three books from Zone2Source's library which I found relevant for the project. Those books were published a few years ago and were dusty. I don't know when was the last time that someone had opened them. But, you know, books come to life by using them. I loved that during the weekend I had so many questions from people asking me information or commenting about a specific book, taking pictures, reading or spending time with the books.

I believe that without the file system it wouldn't have been as successful. The file system added an element of playfulness that raised curiosity about the books.

I'm happy with this result of the project, but it is definitely not the only aspect I'm interested in.

For the immediate future, I like the idea to sit with a word, preferably in a space with nature, and do an in depth exploration of the chosen key-words. I don't know how this project will develop but I'd like to try your idea of working on it for one whole year – tending these seeds for this length of time.



Angela Serino

Angela Serino is a curator, writer and permaculture student based in Amsterdam. She is the co-founder of ARRC, a collective that studies art residencies, with fellow researchers Pau Catà (Barcelona), Morag Iles (Newcastle), Miriam La Rosa (Melbourne) and Patricia Healy Mcmeans (Minneapolis).

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title fig.	Balans LaB
fig. 1	Balans LaB
fig. 2	Balans LaB
fig. 3	Balans LaB
fig. 4	Tasha Arlova
fig. 5	Tasha Arlova
fig. 6	Tasha Arlova
fig. 7	Balans LaB
fig. 8	Tasha Arlova

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Amsterdam, 2022

A Absence
Adaptation

B Biophilia
Bird of Paradise
Breakdown

C Companionship
Cosmology
Cows

D Death
Diffraction
Dreaming
Ducks

E Earth
Edges

F

G Geese

H Hope

I Immanenza (immanence)
Incorporation
Injustice

J Judasoor (Juda's ear)

K Knopig Helmkruid (Figwort)

L Life
Listening
Love

M Meseolanza (mixture)
Miselezione (planetary mixing)

N Negotiation
Notation

O Orchid
ORYNGHAM

P Paradijsvogelbloem (Bird of Paradise)
Patterns
Phototropism
Phytoene
Pollination

Q

R Respiro (Breath)
Rituals

S Sit post
Species
Spirits
Symbiosis

T Transformation

U

V Voices

W

X

Z Zoe

'Meseolanza (mixture)'
by Angela Serino

a selection of books, a set of cards
and an invitation to read together
on Saturday ('Duck and Goose
Politics', with Ege Kökel) and
Sunday ('ORYNGHAM').
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