

# Filming-Gardening in the Neoliberal Age: Ambivalences in the Life and Work of Anne Charlotte Robertson

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*This article discovers politically productive ambivalences in the film, audio, written, and horticultural work of the Massachusetts gardener-filmmaker Anne Charlotte Robertson (1949-2012). Robertson suffered mental health issues throughout adulthood and sought solace by documenting her gardening on film and paper. Such activities were her form of ecotherapy, unlike the hospitalisation and medication she described as ‘drug chains.’ Using nature as a refuge, and gardening-filmmaking as an alternative, agroecological form of citizenship and lifestyle, was also Robertson’s means of resisting the financialisation and social dislocation she felt transform her surroundings during the 1970s and 80s. Robertson’s work demonstrates a radically inclusive empathy towards her environment. But it reveals more than ecological, personal, and political protest; it is riddled with ambivalences. Robertson’s interest in self-help, for example, plays into what we may now recognise as neoliberalism’s promotion of individual responsibility. Likewise, her voluntary work in local community gardens critiques an increasingly prevalent emphasis on private property and globalisation, but risks papering over the cracks caused by welfare cuts, by providing vegetables and greenspace for those the cuts hit hardest. Robertson’s refusal to distinguish work from life also exposes a tension between her holistic approach and the pervasive influence of a ‘flexible’ worker model—that is, what Catherine Malabou identifies as an economically productive subject willing to blend work and life. Robertson’s body of work, and her own body (which she films bingeing, dieting, holding handfuls of Valium, handfuls of seeds), foreground these tensions. Responding to her historical moment, Robertson’s work anticipates debates over social and environmental responsibility today.*

‘Making my diary has literally saved my life,’ wrote the Massachusetts filmmaker and gardener Anne Charlotte Robertson (1949-2012).<sup>1</sup> Taking personal responsibility for her well-being during episodes of mental illness, Robertson gardened and filmed her garden as a form of diary. This practice culminated in her magnum opus, *Five Year Diary*, an autobiographical film which she began in 1981 and ended far later than its title anticipated, in 1997. At over 36 hours spread across 84 Super-8 reels, the film documents 16 years of Robertson’s life, foregrounding the therapeutic and environmental benefits of organic gardening. The *Diary* is shot handheld, often in rapid takes, roving and cutting between house, garden, plants, and vegetable-preparation in the kitchen. For Robertson, being well meant being in the garden, with a camera in one hand and seeds in the other, responding to changes in light, to flowers blossoming, tomatoes ripening, or compost maturing.<sup>2</sup>

But the *Diary* also responds to Robertson’s socio-political environment. Documenting a time of momentous change in North American society, the film tracks welfare provision giving way to a market-driven logic of competition and individualism, highways and tech companies expanding across the Massachusetts landscape, and healthcare becoming increasingly reliant on the pharmaceutical industry.<sup>3</sup> A sprawling and devastatingly frank corpus of work, the *Diary* offers a chronicle of resilience and vulnerability in the face of such change.

Above all else, Robertson’s body of work (and her own body, which she films gardening, cooking garden produce, bingeing, dieting, holding handfuls of Valium, handfuls of seeds) foreground instances of ambivalence, testifying to a person neither at home within a sociopolitical environment, nor able to denounce or withdraw from it entirely. Discovering moments of ambivalence in Robertson’s life and work, and exposing their political acuity, is the task of this article. As Robertson begins to become more well known, it is vital that we understand the full implications of her experience, performance, and representation of ambivalence.<sup>4</sup> More than a personal or confessional

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<sup>1</sup> This is a project description Robertson wrote as part of a grant application in 1991. Harvard Film Archive: Anne Charlotte Robertson Collection (hereafter HFA). Unless otherwise indicated, direct quotations used in this article are taken from this collection at the HFA or are my own transcriptions of Robertson’s film soundtracks.

<sup>2</sup> Robertson worked in several gardens in Massachusetts, including Mission Hill Community Garden in Jamaica Plain, a southern suburb of Boston, and a community garden and the garden of her mother’s house, both in Framingham.

<sup>3</sup> For more on such changes, see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Robert Whitaker, *Anatomy of an Epidemic: Magic Bullets, Psychiatric Drugs, and the Astonishing Rise of Mental Illness in America* (New York: Broadway, 2011); Helena Hansen, Philippe Bourgois and Ernest Drucker, ‘Pathologizing poverty: New forms of diagnosis, disability, and structural stigma under welfare reform,’ *Social Science & Medicine*, 103 (2014) 76-83.

<sup>4</sup> Mainly thanks to Harvard Film Archive’s programming and outreach initiatives, Robertson’s work is gradually receiving its due recognition. Reels of *Five Year Diary*, and selected shorts, were shown at the London gallery Raven Row in 2015, for example, Documenta 14 in Germany (2017), and at MMCA in South Korea (2018). Beyond catalogue essays and journalism, little has been written about Robertson. Few scholars have given her the same attention afforded diary-filmmaker counterparts—most of whom are male—including Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas. Scott MacDonald was, however, an early champion of her work, and more recently, Anjo-Mari Gouws has written about Robertson’s gendered labour in relation to feminism. Scott MacDonald, *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films about Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); MacDonald also interviews Robertson in *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Anjo-Mari Gouws, ‘Hearing and Seeing the In/Visible: Anne Charlotte Robertson’s *Five Year Diary*’, in *Invisibility in Visual and Material Culture*, ed. by Asbjørn Grønstad and Øyvind Vågnes (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 165–78; Gouws, *Recording the Work of a World: Anne Charlotte Robertson’s Diary Film and the Domestication of Cinema* (University of Toronto, 2020) [PhD dissertation]; Gouws, ‘I’m Washing My Dishes and Making a Movie’: Anne Charlotte Robertson and World-Making as Women’s Work’, *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, 35.3 (105) (2020), 60–87.

filmmaker, Robertson is profoundly political. Ambivalence is indicative of her historical moment—she was pulled in two or more directions, and her films witness her flexibility in response to such conditions. This flexibility signifies strength and, at the same time, confusion, and anguish.

## A Body of Work

13 boxes of notes, drawings, letters, and diaries; 84 reels of Super-8 film; and hundreds of audio tapes—the Anne Charlotte Robertson Collection is massive and as yet uncatalogued. The films are being restored and digitalised by Harvard Film Archive, though some film reels remain under embargo until 2023, as stipulated by Robertson’s will. I watch the 25-minute film reels, open boxes of seed packets and hospital discharge notes, and find pages of confessions, resolutions, poems, and a pair of life-size handprints she made on a photocopier. This is her life’s work, and her work is infused with her life, her vitality, her biting political consciousness, wry humour, sadness, desire.

Robertson considered *Five Year Diary* to be her central work, and her short films as part of the *Diary*’s wider project. The written diary, and Robertson’s gardening, cooking, and political activism were also part of her life’s work. Robertson’s audio tapes were intended either as voice-notes for romantic crushes (she sometimes posted these cassette tapes to them) or as audio material for use in her films’ layered soundtracks. The *Diary* and short films maintain a remarkable consistency of theme and formal tone due to the fact that she revisited and edited reels months and years after filming them. The major development in them is Robertson’s visible ageing and weight gain. Reels are labelled chronologically, with the first dated 3 November to 13 December 1981, and Reel 84 left undated but completed sometime after 18 March 1997. Alongside reels’ numbers and dates, Robertson usually added a descriptive title, such as *Another Breakdown: Will I Ever Mend?* and *The Definitions of Fat and Thin*. Some of the shorts contain two dates, indicating Robertson’s process of re-working them—for instance, *Melon Patches, Or Reasons to Go On Living* is dated 1994 and 1998. The *Diary* and shorts revisit a set of themes over and over—weight loss and gain, gardening, environmental activism, mental illness, ageing, and loneliness. Certain themes achieve additional prominence as Robertson devotes short films to them—mental health and gardening in *Melon Patches*, for example, and feminist subjectivity in *Apologies*. Robertson mined her written diaries for material to use in her films, including her earliest journal, which she began aged 11 with a resolution to lose weight. Similar to how Robertson’s films contain re-workings and edits, her written diaries contain numerous redactions, scores-through, annotations, asides, and responses. The impression is that Robertson is constantly talking to herself. Words are characterised by self-censure and self-improvement. Beyond reflecting

Robertson's own disposition, they also speak to her time. Developed in the late 1970s, Robertson's diaristic film work grows from a personal turn in filmmaking that relates more broadly to what became known as the 'Me Decade' for its emphasis on individualism and self-improvement (the 1970s earned this name partly from an article by Tom Wolfe, one of Robertson's long-running crushes).<sup>5</sup>



*Five Year Diary* in boxes.

COURTESY OF THE ANNE CHARLOTTE ROBERTSON COLLECTION, HARVARD FILM ARCHIVE, HARVARD COLLEGE LIBRARY.

Robertson's incessant labour in producing and editing her sprawling body of work on film and paper, in the garden, and on her own body image, performs a striking ambivalence: she is deliberately unclear about whether she is critiquing or succumbing to ideas and ideals of productivity and self-improvement. Documenting herself manically filming, writing, and cultivating fruit and vegetables (one summer, she grows no fewer than 31 varieties of tomato), Robertson presents a portrait of productivity and flexibility on the brink of exhaustion as she strives for recognition within a pervasive neoliberal ideal of an economically productive worker.<sup>6</sup> Given that Robertson refused to separate her accounts of her life and work—because to do so would suppress the political power she achieved by

<sup>5</sup> Tom Wolfe, 'The me decade and the third great awakening,' *New York Magazine* 23, 8 (1976), 26-40.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008)

cultivating seeming contradictions—I shall not distinguish between them here.

In the context of such complexity, Robertson’s archive requires a form of scholarship that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes as ‘reparative reading.’ It asks us to assemble disparate and sometimes contradictory fragments in an approach that welcomes surprise, and multiple or divergent interpretations. This non-dualistic way of reading invites an engagement with several discourses that respects their vital differences and values their moments of affinity.<sup>7</sup> Reparative reading is not a method for drawing conclusions as a stable and knowing subject, but a means to enrich understandings of where we are now and how we got here, allowing a reader to envision futures different from the present.<sup>8</sup> Sedgwick emphasises the importance of allying thinking with feeling in this process, describing a reader who connects with her body, desires, and lived experiences, and is open to being taken in unanticipated directions.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the reparative reader is an ambivalent reader. Robertson herself operates as such a reader, assembling and re-editing disparate images and discourses into a complex, never-finished corpus of material that reflects her conflicted experiences. Today, a reparative reading of Robertson’s work sheds light on wider narratives of where we are now and how we got here—that is, how we became embroiled in the socially and ecologically harmful dependencies that characterise our anthropocenic, capitalist present. Such a reading invites us to envision alternative futures, extending beyond Robertson’s body of work and biography to considerations of the wider sociopolitical contexts in which she lived—many of which continue to condition ways we think about nature, health, and community today.

## Neoliberal encroachments

‘I pick blackberries, raspberries, and unemployment checks. I begin to get panicky. Symptom: film everything in short flashes.’<sup>10</sup> Robertson faces the camera. Light comes through the window and catches the left side of her face. She has been in the garden all day, filming, weeding, watering, picking fruit and vegetables. Robertson is 45 years old, single, childless. ‘I shall try to imagine being happy,’ she says. ‘I shall hope for miracles.’<sup>11</sup> From the soundtrack’s left channel, she speaks over herself, doubling

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<sup>7</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Sedgwick, 146, 149; Sian Melvill Hawthorne, ‘Reparative Reading’ as Queer Pedagogy’, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no. 1 (2018): 155.

<sup>9</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 130.

<sup>10</sup> Anne Charlotte Robertson, notes from April/ May 1983.

<sup>11</sup> Reel 80 Emily Died (14 May to 26 September 1994)

the voiceover: ‘You can see my face is rather stiff. My mouth is making movements. It means I’m taking the anti-psychotic medication.’ This sequence is from Reel 80 of the *Diary*. Robertson filmed it in the spring and summer of 1994, largely at the house she shared with her mother in Framingham.<sup>12</sup> The reel is one of the *Diary*’s most poignant. In it Robertson mourns the death of her three-year-old niece Emily. She films a medical centre. Here she was hospitalised after Emily’s death. The film cuts to a street sign: ‘Watch your step.’ The sign reads as an ominous warning. Then a close-up shot of the palm of her right hand. It is full of pills—Valium and Risperdal. And now another cut. She is in the garden’s amber light. It is early evening. She says: ‘We go to the garden, we grow in the garden.’ Surely the ambiguity of her utterance is deliberate: to grow one’s garden and to grow one’s self. In Robertson’s mind, these efforts go hand in hand. The shot recalls a scene in her short film *Melon Patches*, in which Valium transmutes into watermelon seeds in Robertson’s outstretched hand. Surrounded by flowers and melons growing in her garden, Robertson films herself lamenting not having children.<sup>13</sup> She associates melon seeds with psychopharmaceutical tablets, and harvested melons with the pregnant abdomen. By a simple method of cutting between shots, Robertson exchanges medication for home-grown respite. Her garden is a refuge, an asylum in the original sense of sanctuary. ‘I had no children,’ she reminds us. ‘All I had was a garden with seeds.’ The image of seed-like pills in her hand and garden fascinated Robertson. Medication did not always agree with her—Lithium especially. Associated with modern science, the pharmaceutical industry, privatised healthcare, and diminishing welfare provision, pills are Robertson’s symbol for her era. They appear in the garden, suddenly and uncannily resembling melon seeds, as a presentiment of history looking up at her, saying *swallow me, cure yourself*. They seem to remind her of her failure to succeed professionally (economically) and romantically (Robertson longed to marry).

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<sup>12</sup> After her mother’s death, Robertson moved into subsidised housing for low-income tenants in Framingham.

<sup>13</sup> Many of Robertson’s films are labelled with two dates because she later added soundtracks or cut scenes.



Anne Charlotte Robertson, *Melon Patches, Or Reasons to Go On Living*, 1994, film still.  
 COURTESY OF THE ANNE CHARLOTTE ROBERTSON COLLECTION, HARVARD FILM ARCHIVE, HARVARD COLLEGE LIBRARY.

Robertson did not use the word ‘neoliberalism’ but it is central to outlining the conditions in and against which she operated, and which made her feel inadequate as an economically and biologically productive subject. Neoliberalism has been widely used to conceptualise a system based on the belief that human well-being is best advanced by the maximisation of entrepreneurial individual freedom, private property, and free trade.<sup>14</sup> Since the 1970s, neoliberalism has come to occupy a position of global dominance in an uneven series of euphemistically titled ‘developments,’ which include the extension of competitive markets into all areas of life, including economics, politics,

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<sup>14</sup> David Harvey, ‘Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction,’ *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 610 (2007) and *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*; Philip Mirowski, *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009) 139-168; Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018)

society, and natural resources.<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault described neoliberalism as a historically novel form of managerial government that uses various techniques for subjugating bodies and controlling populations.<sup>16</sup> Neoliberalism produces economic subjects who exhibit specific tendencies, preferences, and motivations; it encourages and necessitates competitiveness and self-interest. It was against just such forces that Robertson developed a form of ecotherapy, as personal and political resistance.

## Ecotherapy: for people and landscapes

Robertson's practice was a forerunner of ecotherapy's approach of using plant life and horticulture for improving a person's life and that of a community.<sup>17</sup> Rejecting what she described as 'drug chains' and hospitalisation, Robertson's ecotherapeutic garden activities yielded creativity and catharsis. In written notes from 1979, she describes 'watching the light fade, adjusting the camera iris, calming me by the process, by the behavior.' Imagining a 'perfect day,' she includes the presence of her camera, going 'click every eight seconds all day.' Hands-on cinephilia, and a love of plants (literally, biophilia), are her combined therapies, providing ways to survive what Robertson called the 'worst angers.'<sup>18</sup> By gardening and filming, Robertson simultaneously practiced a form of environmental hope, and hope for her own recovery from 'those who persecute me and the earth.' Such hope is common in ecotherapy, where the cultivation of mental health and plants is considered in tandem, and gardening is understood as being about remaking people as well as landscapes.<sup>19</sup>

Robertson's association of the degradation of happiness with the degradation of the natural environment anticipates ecotherapy's understanding that the further people move from plants and green spaces (and a vocabulary to describe them), the less they are able to protect the ecosystem, and the more they suffer species loneliness, anxiety, and depression—the very ailments that have proliferated in the neoliberal era.<sup>20</sup> Ecotherapy tackles this problem by promoting gardening to benefit

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Anti-Democratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia UP, 2019)

<sup>16</sup> Foucault, *The Will* 140; Tony Schirato et al., *Understanding Foucault: A Critical Introduction* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2012) 90.

<sup>17</sup> The term first appears in the work of Howard Clinebell, a Methodist minister who argued that 'ecoalienation' led to 'alienation from our minds, souls and relationships.' Howard Clinebell, 'Greening Pastoral Care,' *Journal of Pastoral Care*, 48, 3 (September 1994) 209-14. It also appears in the historian Theodore Roszak's *Ecopyschology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind* (San Francisco: Counterpoint, 1995)

<sup>18</sup> In a note written in August 1989, Robertson explains 'These are the worst angers. These are not poems but how much I feel trapped in a corner seeing my family destroyed along with the earth.'

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2015) 263.

<sup>20</sup> Lucy Jones, *Losing Eden: Why Our Mind Needs the Wild* (London: Penguin, 2020); Robert MacFarlane, *Landmarks* (London: Penguin, 2015)

a wide range of conditions, physical and mental, as well as helping manage obesity and stress.<sup>21</sup> Medical research continues to find correlations between contact with plants and faster recovery times; an abundance of recent books attest to gardening's usefulness for mental wellbeing, several referring to *shinrin-yoku* or 'forest bathing,' which has long been practiced as a treatment for stress in Japan.<sup>22</sup> Many studies in ecotherapy emphasise that being outdoors in air and daylight helps maintain circadian rhythms, which in turn regulate sleep and reduce anxiety— symptoms Robertson suffered regularly.<sup>23</sup> Physical exercise from gardening has been shown to improve circulation and cardiovascular health, and produce endorphins that relieve stress and pain.<sup>24</sup> Even soil helps, through its composition of natural bacteria such as *mycobacterium vaccae*, which activates molecular mechanisms of microbial chemistry in the immune system.<sup>25</sup> Ecotherapy emphasises kitchen gardening as a direct way of connecting land with body, through planting, harvesting, preparing, and digesting plants. Fresh fruit and vegetables provide nutrients, vitamins, and fibre vital for maintaining a healthy immune system and weight. Robertson certainly understood this, growing and preparing vast quantities of fruit and vegetables for herself, friends, and local homeless shelters.<sup>26</sup> Ecotherapy enabled Robertson to practice an ethics of care both in the way she cared for plants, animals, and her own health (we might think of the word 'love' in her combined biophilia and cinephilia), and in her caring about social and environmental justice as an activist programme.

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<sup>21</sup> Amanda Godber in conversation with author, NHS Vale Community Hospital, Dursley, Gloucestershire, June 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Roger Ulrich, 'View through a window may influence recovery,' *Science*, 224, 4647 (1984) 224-225; Jesper J. Alvarsson et al., 'Stress recovery during exposure to nature sound and environmental noise,' *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 7, 3 (2010) 1036-1046; Rachel Kaplan, *The Experience of Nature: A Psychological Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 1989); Sue Stuart-Smith, *The Well Gardened Mind: Rediscovering Nature in the Modern World* (Harper Collins, 2020); Isabella Tree, *Wilding: The Return of Nature to a British Farm* (Pan MacMillan, 2019); Yoshifumi Miyazaki, *Shinrin Yoku: The Japanese Art of Forest Bathing* (London: Aster, 2018); Qing Li, *Shinrin Yoku: The Art and Science of Forest Bathing* (London: Penguin, 2018); Emi Morita et al., 'Psychological effects of forest environments on healthy adults: *Shinrin-yoku* (forest-air bathing, walking) as a possible method of stress reduction,' *Public Health*, 121, 1 (2007) 54-63.

<sup>23</sup> Jan Born et al., 'Effects of sleep and circadian rhythm on human circulating immune cells,' *The Journal of Immunology*, 158, 9 (1997) 4454-4464.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Myers, 'Exercise and cardiovascular health,' *Circulation*, 107, 1 (2003) e2-e5; Allan H. Goldfarb, 'β-Endorphin response to exercise,' *Sports Medicine*, 24, 1 (1997) 8-16.

<sup>25</sup> Jones, *Losing Eden* 24-32.

<sup>26</sup> While the term is recent, the ideas behind ecotherapy are far from new. Natural, outdoor spaces have long been understood as restorative. Epicurus saw his kitchen garden as an embodiment of his philosophy, using the garden to demonstrate that living beings respond to human care, and to emphasise humanity's shared fate with the environment. One of the first anthologies of English poetry, *Tottel's Miscellany* (1557) contains a recognition of the therapeutic benefits to 'heavy hearts' of gardens that 'chaseth' away 'all doleful dumps.' From the 19th century, allotment gardening (commonly called community gardening in the US) developed as a method of sustaining poor urban populations with fresh fruit and vegetables, and was valued for its health benefits and for improving social cohesion.



Anne Charlotte Robertson, *Five Year Diary* Reel 80, 1994, film still.  
COURTESY OF THE ANNE CHARLOTTE ROBERTSON COLLECTION, HARVARD FILM ARCHIVE, HARVARD COLLEGE LIBRARY.

## Land Cinema as Activism

Beyond being a method of ecotherapeutic self-help then, Robertson's turn to organic gardening in the mid-1970s was also political. Gardening presented a way to re-establish a direct connection between manual labour in the community and the biophysical environment, which Robertson felt large agribusiness and food importation eroded. Yet in such a response lies the first of several tensions present within Robertson's life and work: if her volunteering in community gardens challenges a neoliberal emphasis on private property and globalisation, then it also risks obscuring the gaps left by cuts to welfare provision, by providing vegetables and greenspace for those hit hardest by the state's scaling back of provisions. Given Robertson's political orientations, this was a tension that would not have escaped her notice.

From her student days in the mid-1970s at Massachusetts College of Art, where she learned 8mm filmmaking with Saul Levine, Robertson had felt overwhelming responsibility for issues of social and environmental justice, advocating for human, animal, and land rights. These issues feature in Robertson's voiceovers on the *Diary's* soundtracks, and in eccentric environmental protest letters she wrote to politicians expressing similar concerns.<sup>27</sup> Robertson spends the entire 17-minutes of her short film *Apologies* (1986-90) saying sorry—at first for the poor light-levels and lack of camera focus. Soon, however, her attention turns to her almost crushing sense of responsibility for social and environmental ills. The overall effect is purposefully ambiguous. As in her *Diary*, Robertson uses cynicism to question ideas of agency and responsibility, inviting us to acknowledge our participation in a complex and vulnerable system—or, in the words of Donna Haraway, to 'stay with the trouble.'<sup>28</sup>

Organic agriculture attracted Robertson because it understands farms or gardens as functioning, like an organism, in symbiotic relation to the surroundings, and the gardener or farmer's role as being to cultivate a meshwork of elements with as much care as possible—using natural substances and processes of composting and insect pollination.<sup>29</sup> Like many in her generation who had witnessed environmental catastrophes, including the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill and Three Mile Island's nuclear explosion in 1979, Robertson expressed fury about pollution. Books including Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which catalogued the adverse effects of chemical pesticides on humans and the environment, were widely read at the time, and contributed not only to individual changes in lifestyle such as

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<sup>27</sup> Robertson described her letters: 'Mostly, they're just sort of your all-purpose liberal-green-politics letters.' In August 1986, she wrote a 17-page letter of requests 'to whom it may concern [...] addressed to the people of the world,' asking for an end to violence, drug dealing, arms manufacture, and pollution.

<sup>28</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016)

<sup>29</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Gift of Good Land: Further essays cultural and agricultural* (New York: Counterpoint Press, 2018), 143; John Paull, 'Attending the first organic agriculture course: Rudolf Steiner's agriculture course at Koberwitz, 1924,' *European Journal of Social Sciences* 21, 1 (2011). William Lockeretz (ed.), *Organic farming: an international history* (Wallingford: CABI, 2007).

Robertson's turn to organic horticulture, but also to the foundation of America's EPA (Environmental Protection Agency), the Deep Ecology Movement, and Earth Day.<sup>30</sup> It was in this spirit that the Boston area of Jamaica Plain, where Robertson lived for several years, saw a successful campaign to halt the routing of an interstate highway in 1979, and the creation of an environmental festival, Wake Up the Earth, that continues to this day.

Such campaigns drew from environmental discourses that were based on holistic understandings of nature as a cooperative system or 'biosphere' of mutually constitutive and vulnerable elements, and this contrasted with earlier ecological systems theories that characterised nature as a field of competitive forces.<sup>31</sup> These new discourses forwarded understandings of natural processes such as pollination in semiotic and affective ways, understanding the planet as a synergistic complex of which humans are one part.<sup>32</sup> Robertson's ideas of nature stem from this moment of systems thinking. A proximity to Concord, with its history of nature writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and Amherst, with its association with Emily Dickinson, also infused Robertson's work with more historical, local, and spiritual forms of environmentalism. Like these figures, particularly Thoreau, she uses diary as a mode to weave accounts of life, work, animals, plants, and people. To use a term unknown in Thoreau's day, and that came to prominence in Robertson's, *Five Year Diary* displays an eco-systemic understanding of life as being a meshwork of animal, vegetable, mineral, political and socioeconomic constituents.<sup>33</sup>

In an extension and embodiment of this multi-species approach, Robertson screened *Five Year Diary* publicly and performatively, providing live voice-over commentary on its multi-layered soundtrack, and supplying objects from her kitchen and garden as 'props' and refreshments. Robertson's live presence added an embodied and performative charge to a work already pulsing with confessional energy. Outdoor screenings of the *Diary*, in which film was projected onto a tarpaulin, were held in community gardens in which Robertson volunteered in Boston. Robertson performed live commentaries that included excerpts from her written diaries, which she encouraged audiences to read during more monotonous parts, recommending pertinent excerpts ('Please read the 1984 journal; it shows a psychosis in its extreme form, flowering and trembling and strident.')

<sup>34</sup> In a week-long show

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<sup>30</sup> Patricia Hynes, *The Recurring Silent Spring* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1989)

<sup>31</sup> Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: The Roots of Ecology* (Cambridge University Press, 1994) 311.

<sup>32</sup> Related but distinct discourses include the Gaia hypothesis, and Deep Ecology, both of which emerged during the 1970s. It is worth noting that the Deep Ecology Movement has received criticism for its emphasis on wilderness at the cost of recognising indigenous lands, and Gaia has also been used in arguments for conservative political systems. Ramachandra Guha and J. Martinez-Allier, 'Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique. Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South,' *Environmental Ethics*, 11, 1 (Spring 1989), 71-83; Alan Marshall, *The Unity of Nature* (London: Imperial College Press, 2002)

<sup>33</sup> I am borrowing the term 'meshwork' from Tim Ingold, see for example, *Being Alive: essays on movement, knowledge and description* (London: Routledge, 2011) 43, 63-4.

<sup>34</sup> Screening notes from 1986.

at New York's Museum of the Moving Image in 1988, Robertson installed herself and her bedroom, and invited audiences to sit with her and watch the *Diary*.<sup>35</sup> Using props, food, performance, and installation in this way, she drew audiences, materials, and environments (and their multi-species occupants) together in complex events that blurred demarcations between individual and collective, private and public, gardening and filmmaking.

Such an interdisciplinary approach also speaks to a feminist strategy for consciousness-raising that was popular in second-wave feminism from the 1970s, of which Robertson was certainly aware, whereby personal history was displayed, analysed, and re-invented, with the body becoming a gendered and charged focus for collective political reflection.<sup>36</sup> With her refusal to separate public and private came a playful complicating of the feminist adage 'the personal is political.' Robertson's performative garden screenings show that the personal is political—and that the political must also concern non-human constituents with whom we share the environment. The *Diary*'s soundtracks abound with overlapping voices—including Robertson's own, and birdsong, the gurgling of her baby nieces and nephews, radios, sirens. Hers is a kind of ecofeminism, one that is all the more striking today in its anticipation of more recent developments in philosophical vitalism and post-humanist materialisms—that is, in thinking that extends a notion of community beyond the exclusively human.<sup>37</sup>

Robertson understood film as an integral material constituent of the multi-species ecosystem she cultivated. Filmmaking closely related to gardening in her mind due to film's material connections with plants and sunlight, in addition to its animal and chemical elements. Celluloid film stock is manufactured from plants (usually cotton plants) whose fibres are pulverised and mixed with a solvent to produce a translucent, flexible strip on which a crystalline layer of emulsion is overlaid. When exposed to light, it registers with a photographic negative.<sup>38</sup> The analogy Robertson enjoyed is clear: plants react to light through a process of photosynthesis; plant-based film stock reacts to light through photography.<sup>39</sup> These similarities mean that photographs resemble, in André Bazin's words, 'a phenomenon in nature, like a flower;' and 'the 'life' we see moving on the screen is a kind of re-animation' of plants.<sup>40</sup> Understood thus, filmmaking resembles horticulture. Screening the films in

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<sup>35</sup> Scott MacDonald in conversation with author, February 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Moira Roth (ed.) *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America, 1970-1980* (Los Angeles: Astro Artz, 1983), 18; Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 15. In a letter to Marjorie Keller on 13 March 1992, Robertson relates her exhibition innovations to the hippie movement, Happenings, and Expanded Cinema.

<sup>37</sup> For more on post-humanist concepts and environmental concerns in recent cinema, see the recent *Screen* dossier, particularly Cassandra Guan and Adam O'Brien, 'Cinema's natural aesthetics: environments and perspectives in contemporary film theory: Introduction,' *Screen* 61, 2 (Summer 2020) 272–279.

<sup>38</sup> Graig Uhlin, 'Plant-Thinking with Film' in Patricia Vieira et al. (eds.) *The Green Thread: Dialogues with the Vegetal World* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019) 202. For more on eco-cinema, see Scott MacDonald, 'Toward an eco-cinema,' *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (2004), 107-132.

<sup>39</sup> Uhlin in Vieira et al. (eds.) 203.

<sup>40</sup> André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 13; Scott MacDonald, 'The Ecocinema

gardens only added to Robertson's grafting of film and garden as ecotherapy.

If carried to a logical conclusion, however, an investigation of film's materiality ought also to include its animal and mineral elements. The light-sensitive emulsion that creates a visible image is suspended in a layer of gelatin, one of the chief ingredients of which is collagen. Collagen is produced by boiling animal bones and tissues.<sup>41</sup> Robertson was an advocate of animal welfare, and vocal about her vegetarianism and participation in anti-hunting initiatives. But nowhere in her films does she mention the unavoidable collagen constituent with which she worked.<sup>42</sup> As for film's mineral components, and compounds of organic and synthetic matter, complications multiply. The 'greenwashed' understanding of celluloid as plant-like downplays film's equally important industrial, hydrocarbonised, and military roots.<sup>43</sup> There is, therefore, a contradiction and ambiguity within the very act of making film that aims at political resistance and ecotherapy but necessitates a certain transgression against ecological principles in order to be realised.

This said, Robertson does not take her own Green aspirations entirely seriously, frequently parodying herself as idealistic or obsessive. Reel 22 finds her manically composting or burying natural-fibre brushes and a leather satchel she wants to 'return to the earth.' In Reel 23, she re-plants root vegetables for fear that unearthing had hurt them. Gardens are not always, or exclusively, represented as pastoral havens either. In Reel 80, we see sun-drenched roses in bloom. 'How to get rid of my foul temper,' Robertson says. Here, ambiguity is crucial. Taken in the interrogative, her words counter the idyllic imagery, as if asking: *My life is not what you see—it's not 'a bed of roses'—how can I get rid of my foul temper?* In the declarative, they propose the garden, and gardening, as means to calm mental turmoil: *This is how to get rid of my foul temper.* Robertson's delivery is flat, infused with dry humour and an ear for language's potential for multiple meanings. Gardening is not always easy, she suggests, and neither is managing emotions.

## Splitting as ambivalence

In a three-minute film from 1985, called *Talking to Myself*, she appears on-screen and argues with another version of herself that is produced through double exposure. The voiceover is doubled also.

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Experience,' in Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt (eds.) *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2013) 26.

<sup>41</sup> Scott MacDonald, 'The *Ecocinema Experience*' in Rust et al. (eds.) 26; *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films about Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) 70.

<sup>42</sup> According to the animal welfare agency People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), Kodak and Fuji have researched non-animal alternatives, but claim that they cannot replace animal gelatin in film. <https://www.peta.org/about-peta/faq/does-film-contain-gelatin/>

<sup>43</sup> Nadia Bozak, *The Cinematic Footprint: Lights, Camera, Natural Resources* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011)

Through this simple optical and aural effect, Robertson represents her contradictory emotions and her fraught relation to selfhood. She suggests that one only becomes a subject (in the sense of an individual agent in possession of rights and desires) through the process of subjection to an order (social, legal, or symbolic).<sup>44</sup> And when this order pathologises ‘difference’ as a disorder, as Robertson felt it did with her behaviour, subjectivity could but split and ricochet into competing voices.

This splitting was more than symbolic. Robertson first visited a psychiatrist in 1966, having experienced depressive and suicidal thoughts.<sup>45</sup> Over the following decades, she was treated (in her words, ‘persecuted’) by a number of psychiatrists, social workers, and therapists.<sup>46</sup> Her most frequent diagnoses were bipolar and schizo-affective disorder. She was first hospitalised for a nervous breakdown in 1978, and continued to be held in psychiatric units, often for months at a time, for the rest of her life.<sup>47</sup> Side-effects of anti-psychotic and anti-depressant medications variously made her weepy, lethargic, aggressive.<sup>48</sup> Robertson sometimes depended on alcohol and narcotics, obsessed over her weight, became paranoid. She sometimes paid individuals unwelcome attention bordering on harassment—the most extreme example being a long-term infatuation with Tom Baker, the English actor who played the title role of the BBC drama, *Dr Who* (Robertson sent Baker letters and garden produce, and recorded him messages on cassette tapes throughout the 1980s and 90s).<sup>49</sup> While hospitalised, Robertson was denied access to both garden and camera.<sup>50</sup> During these internments she recalled wishing ‘for a Paradise with gardens.’ The *Diary* contains numerous ellipses that map onto these periods of hospitalisation. ‘I don’t want the police to take my camera,’ Robertson says over footage that documents the beginnings of a manic episode in Reel 23. Later in that same winter of 1982, retrieving her camera and filming again, she laments: ‘frost had killed my garden while I was in the hospital.’<sup>51</sup> A decade after this episode, Robertson reflected: ‘The camera was my saving grace. I believe in film being necessary every day. Losing that camera, I lost my mind. Every time there’s a

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<sup>44</sup> For more on this concept and how it plays out in film, see Catherine Russell, *Experimental ethnography: the work of film in the age of video* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999) 280; Alisa Lebow (ed.) *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012) 4.

<sup>45</sup> Recounted in a letter to Marjorie Keller, 18 March 1992.

<sup>46</sup> Note from August 1989.

<sup>47</sup> Letter to Marjorie Keller, 18 March 1992. Robertson’s short film *Locomotion* (1980) explores her experience of shuttling between home and hospitals.

<sup>48</sup> For example, in notes on Westborough State Hospital’s discharge referral form for the period 15 September 1989 until 4 October 1989, Robertson is described to have been experiencing significant distress, which resulted in her assaulting her mother. The form notes that this distress was possibly induced by side-effects of lithium carbonate.

<sup>49</sup> Robertson’s brother also experienced her harassment and issued a restraint order in 1999. Robertson first wrote to Tom Baker in 1982 and began sending him tapes in 1986. She attended *Dr Who* conventions in 1983, 1986 and 1991. To the last of these, she took Baker 24 jars of relish prepared from her garden produce.

<sup>50</sup> Accounts of Robertson’s hospitalisations appear throughout her papers, though the most concise occurs in her letter to Marjorie Keller, 18 March 1992. Other discharge notes and psychiatric assessments reveal that Robertson was hospitalised in the University of Massachusetts Hospital, Pembroke Psychiatric Hospital, MetroWest Medical Center Framingham, Arbor Hospital, Worcester Hospital, and McLean Hospital (which was famous for having treated the Confessional Boston poets, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath). I have found no evidence that Robertson was aware of this hospital’s poetic legacy, though she does mention reading Sylvia Plath’s poetry in a written diary entry dated 23 March 1985.

<sup>51</sup> *Five Year Diary*: Reel 23 A Breakdown and After the Mental Hospital (Sept. 1 - Dec. 13, 1982)

breakdown, I try to take pictures of it.<sup>52</sup> The anguished and depressed tone of many entries and episodes of Robertson's films and notebooks reveal the way the self and identity are diminished by diagnoses that erode and occlude other, more positive, attributes making up the whole person.<sup>53</sup> As late as 1992, Robertson wrote a number of confessions to herself. Number 18 refers to her *Diary*: 'The movie was supposed to show I got better.' The use of the past tense is telling. Number 19: 'I don't want to be looked at as an ugly woman, I wanted to become more beautiful and more sane.'

Gardening-filmmaking seemed to soothe Robertson's sadness at not having children. Again, she referred to flowers as her 'children,' suggested that filmmaking and editing were like 'giving birth,' and cast herself as 'the parent of the print.'<sup>54</sup> Robertson's compulsion to film herself is, on the one hand, akin to a kind of self-assessment that hopes for increased self-awareness, recovery, and (re)productive creativity. On the other hand, her turn to herself accentuates a notion of losing one's sense of self or experiencing that self as split into multiple, perhaps non-compatible, components. Moreover, the filmed self, and filmed garden, are images of experiences, and not the experience themselves. Layers of retrospective voiceover accentuate this sense of existential, ontological, and even epistemological remove.

## Lunar planting and lunacy: some gendered tropes and subversions

In addition to representing split personalities and a feeling of distance from oneself (at least, from *one* sense of oneself), Robertson plays with ideas of madness, nature, and femininity throughout the *Diary* by repeatedly filming the moon. She sometimes addresses it on the soundtrack, greeting it like a friend. She films herself planting in accordance with its cycles—lunar planting is a common practice in biodynamic gardening.<sup>55</sup> The moon sometimes also resembles a clock-face she uses to measure the passage of time and aging, as well as changes in her mood, and disruptions to her circadian rhythm caused by anti-depressant medications.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Robertson in Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) Robertson mainly filmed on a Nizo Super-8 camera with Kodak film. By the 1990s, Super-8 became prohibitively expensive and Robertson began experimenting with video. Toni Treadway, email correspondence with author, March 2019.

<sup>53</sup> For more on recovery movements, see Nora Jacobson and Dianne Greenley, 'What Is Recovery? A Conceptual Model and Explication,' *Psychiatric Services*, 52, 4 (2001) 482–485; Claire L. Pouncey and Jonathan M. Lukens, 'Madness versus Badness: The Ethical Tension between the Recovery Movement and Forensic Psychiatry,' *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics*, 31, 1 (2010) 93–105.

<sup>54</sup> Robertson scribbled this note onto a piece of bathroom tissue in 1984.

<sup>55</sup> Nicholas Kollerstrom and Gerhard Staudenmaier, 'Evidence for lunar-sidereal rhythms in crop yield: a review,' *Biological Agriculture & Horticulture*, 19, 3 (2001) 247–259; Hartmut Spiess, 'Chronobiological investigations of crops grown under biodynamic management. I. Experiments with seeding dates to ascertain the effects of lunar rhythms on the growth of winter rye (*Secale cereale*, cv. Nomaro),' *Biological Agriculture & Horticulture*, 7, 2 (1990) 165–178; 'Moon Planting Guide,' *The Permaculture Research Institute* (January 2015) <https://permaculturenews.org/2015/01/26/moon-planting-guide/>

<sup>56</sup> Reel 31 (August 1983)

By focusing on the moon and, by extension, ideas of natural cycles, Robertson asks us to question the nature of disorder. This is one of her films' central modes of resistance. Therapy is the healing or treatment of a disorder. Aberrant behaviour is often seen as a disorder, and is consequentially pathologised or penalised.<sup>57</sup> But who decides what qualifies as orderly behaviour or a deviation from it? And what procedures determine how to treat disorder after diagnosis? The word 'order' derives from the classical Latin word for 'row,' and originally described a group of people of the same profession, social class, rank, or position. Order relates to *ōrdō*, 'a thread on the loom', and is cognate with *ōrdiri*— to lay the warp before weaving.<sup>58</sup> To be disorderly, then, is to disrupt the weave of society. Robertson urges us to ask: Who weaves? Who decides the pattern? Who owns the loom?<sup>59</sup> One answer she proposes for this question is male health care professionals. Robertson's fixation on the moon parodies and critiques an archaic yet pervasive set of ideas that links mental disorder to the biological processes of menstruation, childbirth, the menopause, and hormonal changes pathologised as PMT or PMS.<sup>60</sup> 19th-century etiological accounts of women's nervous disorders frequently used an 'ovarian' and 'lunar' model of female behaviour (and feminine 'lunacy'). These accounts claim that women are driven by tidal currents in a cyclical reproductive system bounded by puberty and menopause and reinforced each month by periods.<sup>61</sup> At their most tragic, Robertson's films replicate such stigmatising and misogynist views of mental health as a female problem; at their most acerbic, they parody them.

In this ambivalent vein, Robertson taunts: 'Maybe I'm crazy,' while filming the moon, 'quite mad, quite crazy, quite insane.'<sup>62</sup> The word 'crazy' occurs throughout the *Diary* to draw attention to gendered pathologies and stigma. 'I'm crazy, crazy, crazy, crazy in love,' Robertson chants in the soundtrack of Reel 23, shifting from negative pathologisation to romanticised hyperbole, from one social script to another. The shift destabilises both scripts to create a double (or multiple) perspective as a humorous and ironic antidote to drives for resolution.<sup>63</sup> One meaning of crazy (to be labelled mad) calls the other into question (to be madly in love), thwarting any sense of coherence and completeness for subjectivity. In so doing, Robertson undertakes a form of subversive resignification, recognising

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<sup>57</sup> The exception is artistic eccentricity, but even this is conditioned for normative market appeal. See Paula Hearsum, 'A musical matter of life and death: the morality of mortality and the coverage of Amy Winehouse's death in the UK press,' *Journal of Mortality*, 17, 2 (2012) 182-199.

<sup>58</sup> 'order, n.' *OED Online*. June 2020. Oxford University Press.

<sup>59</sup> My wording here is a play on Benjamin's formulation, which draws from Brecht's 1935 poem, 'Questions from a Worker Who Reads.' Walter Benjamin, 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,' in Michael W. Jennings and Howard Eiland (eds.) *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 4: 1938-1940* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 64.

<sup>60</sup> Busfield, *Men, Women, and Madness* 155.

<sup>61</sup> Carol Smith-Rosenberg, 'Puberty to Menopause: The Cycle of Femininity in Nineteenth Century America,' in Mary Hartman and Lois Banner (eds.) *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) 24.

<sup>62</sup> Reel 23 A Breakdown (and) After the Mental Hospital (1 September to 13 December 1982)

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Kathy Ferguson, *The Man Question: Visions of Subjectivity in Feminist Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 30.

determined aspects of social and gendered life while simultaneously practicing performative reconfigurations of them.<sup>64</sup> Robertson bifurcates any possible route to judgment, opening the way for herself to display signs of mental volatility and signs of amorous zeal at once (in the process, recognising the connotative link between death and love that underpins so many historical representations of romance). Such ambivalence is politically potent because it exceeds both a voluntaristic model of agency, which assumes a pre-existing humanist subject (who had always been ‘mad’), and a theory of social determinism whereby the subject is a passively constituted effect of social forces (that make her ‘mad’ or fall ‘madly’ in love).

Alongside the conflicting meanings of ‘crazy’ that Robertson cultivates on the soundtrack, her *Diary* also achieves political power through ambivalence in the way it is edited, which establishes a tension between confession and self-censorship, and between a drive to parody a neoliberal politic of self-improvement and succumbence to the compulsion to self-edit. Editing thus becomes a way for Robertson to perform and critique societal expectations that women self-edit by modulating behaviour to be ‘appropriate’ and appearance to be ‘attractive.’ Performative critique underlines Robertson’s repeated reference to a ‘one true love’ for whom she is making the *Diary* as a trousseau.<sup>65</sup> On one level, Robertson’s revision, redaction, and annotation of her written and filmed diaries helped her cater for her fantastical husband-to-be, and on another, they served her ambition to ‘transcend or censor or comment on the self-reflective.’<sup>66</sup> Turning to the camera in Reel 53, she confesses ‘I have seen all my films and they ALL. NEED. EDITING.’<sup>67</sup> In such declarations, Robertson was also referring to herself. Green ink demarcated what Robertson called ‘chaff’ in her writing—the excess she wanted removed. This horticultural metaphor is fitting— gardeners sometimes speak of the cathartic satisfaction of threshing, pruning, or weeding, these activities intended to allow plants to grow stronger and healthier.<sup>68</sup> To tidy a garden is seen as analogous to tidying a mind.

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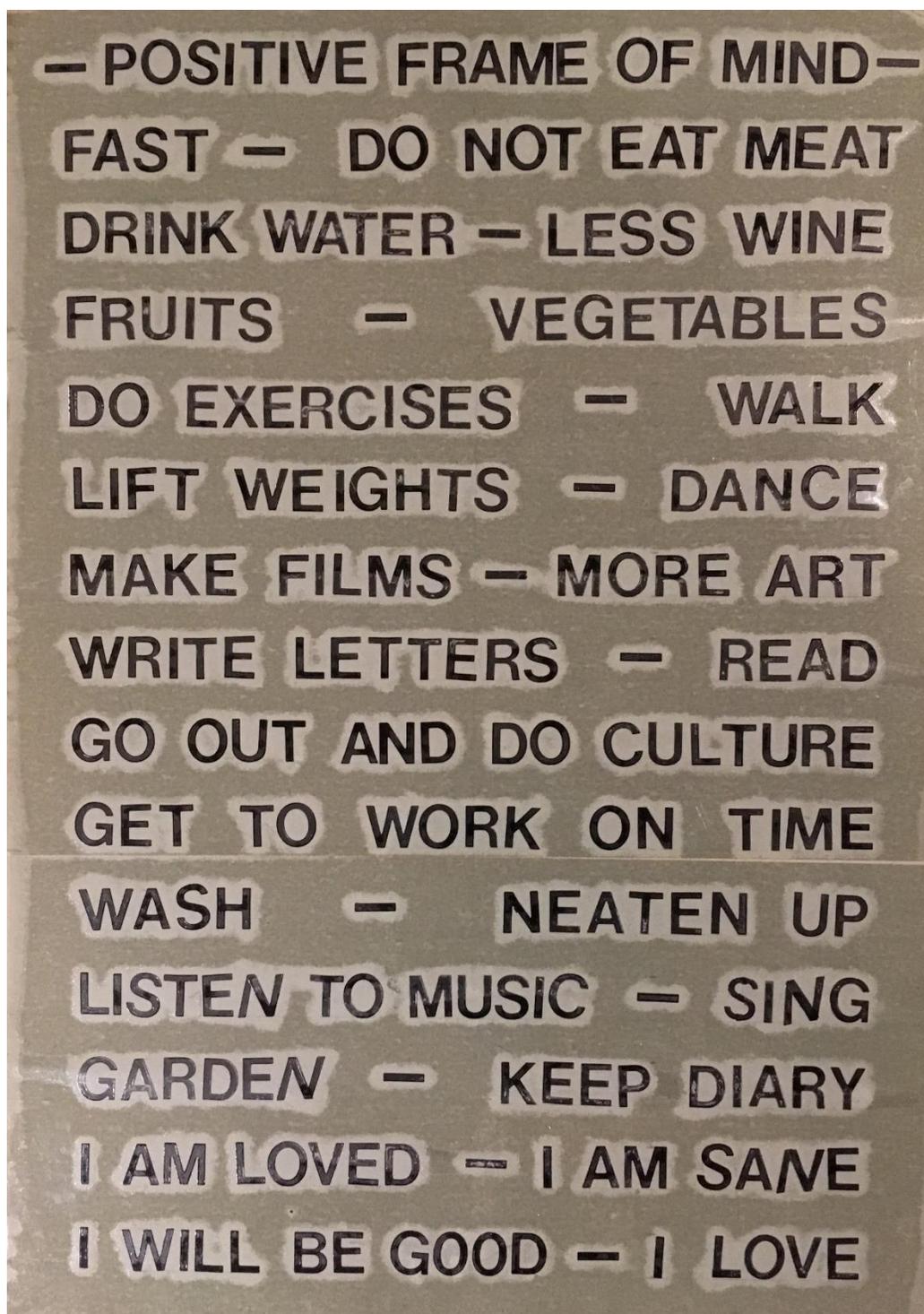
<sup>64</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006)140-5.

<sup>65</sup> A trousseau is made by a woman as she waits for marriage. Robertson’s description of the *Diary* appears on a poster she made in 1986: ‘a trousseau, it’s true, so...’ In Reel 23: A Breakdown and After the Mental Hospital (September - 13 December 1982) Robertson describes the film as containing ‘the small details of my life, and also some major ones. But it is true, so — someday the guy would say, what have you been doing all your life? And I’d say, well — here’s something.’

<sup>66</sup> Written notes for a screening proposal, 1987.

<sup>67</sup> For more on Robertson’s politicised use of editing and the diary form, see Anjo-Mari Gouws, *Recording the Work of a World: Anne Charlotte Robertson’s Diary Film and the Domestication of Cinema* (University of Toronto, 2020) [PhD dissertation]

<sup>68</sup> For more on the catharsis of weeding and pruning, see Stuart-Smith, *The Well Gardened Mind*.



Anne Charlotte Robertson, undated text collage on cardboard. Photograph by Becca Voelcker.  
COURTESY OF THE ANNE CHARLOTTE ROBERTSON COLLECTION, HARVARD FILM ARCHIVE, HARVARD COLLEGE LIBRARY.

The layout of Robertson's original childhood 'five year diary' (which inspired the film's name) invited this mode of self-revision. Each page of the diary is devoted to one day in the calendar year, with a space of five lines allotted to each of the five years the diary covers, so that the diarist writes that day's events while reviewing what happened on that day in previous years. The form is also not unlike a gardener's diary, which allows for previous years' growing cycles to be compared with the current one's. But, carried from Robertson's childhood pages to her film *Diary*, and allied with its layered soundtracks and double exposures, the self-review process comes to enact a more fraught form of splitting that can be understood as what film theorists including Catherine Russell, Alisa Lebow, and Michael Renov describe as a politicised response to pressures to conform to social structures.<sup>69</sup> What Robertson represents in the *Diary*, then, is both an experience of specific mental health issues, and of social persecution. Peering into the camera, she asks 'Aren't I supposed to be beautiful and beloved? Have I lost it? Have I lost my beauty?'<sup>70</sup> Robertson connects ideas of losing her mind, external validation, and physical attractiveness to convey the experience of losing herself, her body, gestures, behaviours, aptitudes and achievements, to social jurisdiction and normativity.<sup>71</sup> Throughout the *Diary*, we witness her fear of police arrest and hospitalisation, and her bombardment with bureaucratic forms and applications for financial aid.

Robertson struggled to hold down a job due to her mental health issues, and was therefore economically marginalised. Her early films were shot on cameras borrowed from art college. Later she bought a second-hand Nizo, but its light meter and lens were unreliable, a fact she laments in *Apologies*. Likewise in the *Diary*, she frequently explains that she cannot afford film processing, or to make copies of the *Diary* for public screenings. Indeed, each time Robertson's original was screened, it showed more scratches.<sup>72</sup> By the early 2000s, Robertson stored the *Diary* in her bedroom closet. By documenting such material struggles, Robertson shows how the freedom of the market that neoliberals proclaim to be the pinnacle of human aspiration turns out to be the means to spread corporate power without constraint—to confer rights and freedoms on those whose income, leisure and security need no enhancing, and to leave a pittance for everyone else.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> For Russell, autoethnographic film is a staging of subjectivity in which the autobiographical self is politicised, split, and performed across cultural discourses (of gender, class, ethnicity). *Experimental ethnography* 276-277, 280. Lebow pursues Russell's idea that the autobiographical voice is fundamentally split, describing the 'first-person' filmmaker as simultaneously the subject-matter of the film and the subject making the film. Lebow (ed.) *The Cinema of Me* 4. Renov argues that 'the subject in documentary has become the subject of documentary,' in *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004)

<sup>70</sup> Reel 80 Emily Died (14 May to 26 September 1994); Reel 81 Mourning Emily (27 September 1994 to 29 January 1995)

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) 298, 304; John Z. Sadler, *Values and Psychiatric Diagnosis* (Oxford University Press, 2005)

<sup>72</sup> Robertson in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema* 2 33. For more on the structural obstacles facing women pursuing creative work with little income, see Joanna Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 6–7.

<sup>73</sup> Harvey, *A Brief History* 31, 37-38. For the relationship between mental health and neoliberalist discourse, see Luigi Esposito and Fernando Perez, 'Neoliberalism and the Commodification of Mental Health,' *Humanity & Society*, 38, 4 (2014) 414-442; Rosemary Rizq, 'Perversion, neoliberalism and therapy: the audit culture in mental health services,' *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, 19, 2 (2014); Jill Fisher, 'Coming Soon to a Physician Near You: Medical Neoliberalism and Pharmaceutical Clinical Trials,' *Harvard*

Mental health provision was outsourced into communities and homes, and enrolment rates in disability support for mental illness escalated throughout the 1980s, as part of the neoliberal project for market efficiency, and following an effort begun in the 1950s to reduce numbers of inpatients.<sup>74</sup> Robertson was amongst the tens of thousands enrolled.<sup>75</sup> And, as she discovered, the consumption of antipsychotics is frequently a requirement for continued receipt of security payments, despite their risks of serious side effects including obesity, diabetes, emotional distress, and elevated cholesterol.<sup>76</sup> The requirement that the poor must repeatedly prove their ‘disabled’ status through therapy and psychotropic medication has resurrected the 16th-century spectre of the ‘unworthy poor,’ further stigmatised vulnerable people, and ensured the growth of a mental health *industry*. Highly lucrative by the late 1970s, when Robertson suffered her first breakdown, privatised healthcare contributes to capitalism’s extractive mechanisms by placing responsibility (as blame, and bills) on the individual patient and her (costly) insurance provider.<sup>77</sup>

In these ways, Robertson felt victimised by the society responsible for her diagnosis, medication, and financial dependency. ‘You consider everything about me as ‘weird and defective,’ she wrote to one psychiatrist, ‘when in fact I am a brilliant woman.’<sup>78</sup> ‘A lot of people are crazy out there in the nine-to-five world,’ she continued, ‘but they lay into me and say I’m the crazy one.’ Robertson was reading R. D. Laing at the time, and learning about a wider movement that developed in the late 1960s and early 70s that became known as antipsychiatry.<sup>79</sup> Antipsychiatry discussed mental disorder in sociopolitical terms, drawing in part from Foucault’s concept of biopolitics that explains how the modern state develops techniques to govern individuals’ conduct via their diet, mental health, and reproductive lives.<sup>80</sup> Biopower, Foucault argued, was pivotal in the development of capitalism, because it manipulated human bodies to serve ‘the machinery of production.’<sup>81</sup> Laing and others understood this, and argued that cure should be less about prescribing pills, more about transforming

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*Health Policy Review*, 8, 1 (2007) 65; Lisa Cosgrove and Justin Karter, ‘The poison in the cure: Neoliberalism and contemporary movements in mental health,’ *Theory & Psychology*, 28, 5 (2018) 671. For the links between food consumption, body image, and neoliberalism, see Julie Guthman and Melanie DuPuis, ‘Embodying Neoliberalism: Economy, Culture, and the Politics of Fat,’ *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 24, 3 (2006) 427-448; Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* (London: Sage, 1999)

<sup>74</sup> For example, the Social Security Disability Insurance Program (SSDI) and the Supplementary Security Income for the Aged, the Disabled, and the Blind (SSI). Cf. Whitaker, *Anatomy of an Epidemic*; Hansen, et al, ‘Pathologizing poverty’ 76-83; Joan Busfield, *Men, Women, and Madness: Understanding Mental Disorder* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1996) 134.

<sup>75</sup> Robertson worked various temporary jobs as a census enumerator, grocery store stock-taker, a delivery person, and entering data in Framingham Library. She mentions relying on welfare payments in several reels of the diary.

<sup>76</sup> See Hansen et al., ‘Pathologizing poverty’ 76-83; Neha Hudepohl and Henry Nasrallah, ‘Antipsychotic drugs,’ in Michael J. Aminoff et al. (eds.) *Handbook of Clinical Neurology*, vol. 106 (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2012) 657-667.

<sup>77</sup> Though beyond the scope of this article, the ties between psychiatric diagnosis and the prison industry cannot be ignored. See Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018); Judah Schept, *Progressive Punishment: Job loss, jail growth, and the neoliberal logic of carceral expansion* (New York University Press, 2015); Michelle Chen, ‘Who Profits From Our Prison System?’ *The Nation* (9 August 2018); David Ladipo, ‘America’s Prison Industry,’ *New Left Review* (January 2001) 109.

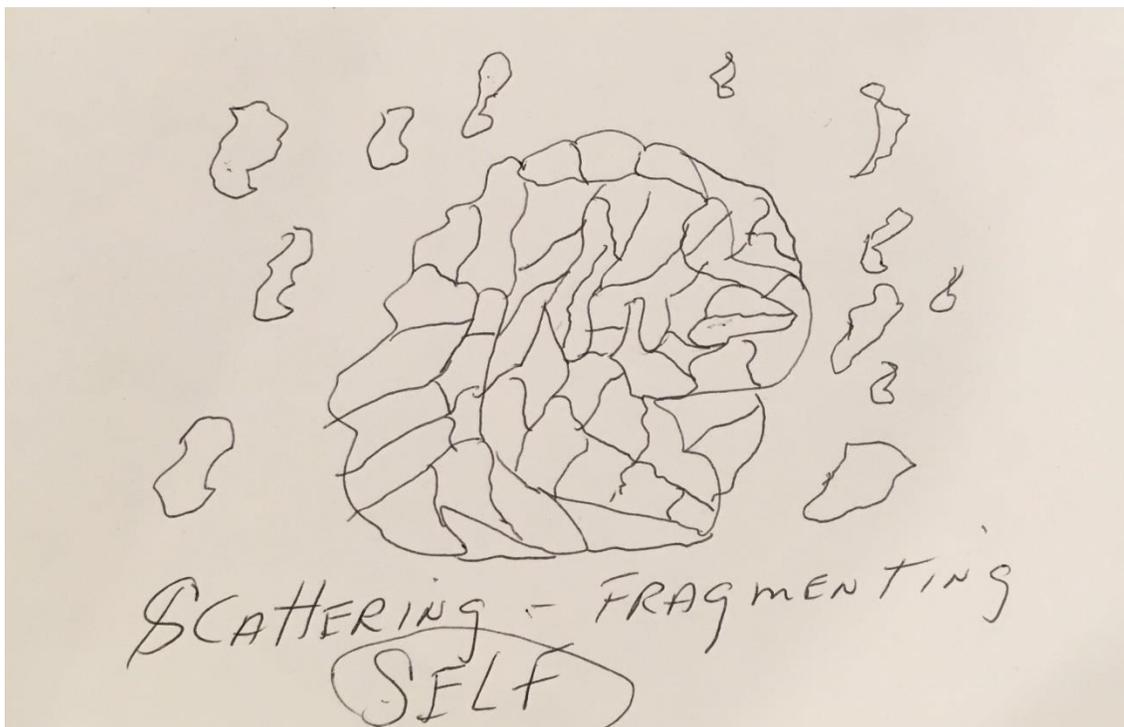
<sup>78</sup> Letter to Jacob Goldberg, 3 August 2006.

<sup>79</sup> Robertson notes that she was reading R. D. Laing in April 1985.

<sup>80</sup> Foucault develops the idea of biopower in the final chapter of *The Will to Knowledge* 137-8.

<sup>81</sup> Foucault, *The Will* 140-41.

environments.<sup>82</sup> At its most extreme, and closest to Robertson's viewpoint, antipsychiatry held that madness was a sane reaction and protest against insane sociopolitical conditions, and that psychiatrists served principally as agents of normative repression.<sup>83</sup> Following this line of thinking, the *Diary* presents neoliberal happiness as a kind of 'cruel optimism' that relies on an ethic of self-responsibility linked to modifying the body, and hyper-consumerism—and it shows that these strategies can exacerbate mental illness.<sup>84</sup> If happiness is a product of unequal, competitive, materialistic and individualistic culture, Robertson suggests, then she will never be beautiful enough, rich enough, no matter how much she works on herself.



Anne Charlotte Robertson, *Scattered Self*, undated drawing. Photograph by Becca Voelcker.

COURTESY OF THE ANNE CHARLOTTE ROBERTSON COLLECTION, HARVARD FILM ARCHIVE, HARVARD COLLEGE LIBRARY.

<sup>82</sup> R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An existential study in sanity and madness* (London: Penguin, 2010); Thomas Szasz, *Manufacture of Madness: A comparative study of the inquisition and the mental health movement* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997); Staub, *Madness* 2.

<sup>83</sup> Staub, *Madness* 5.

<sup>84</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Victoria Pitts-Taylor, 'The plastic brain: Neoliberalism and the neuronal self,' *Health*, 14, 6 (2010) 635–652.

## Cultivating the self

Despite growing from a politicised attunement to society, an ironically individualist, apolitical, and consumerist streak emerged from antipsychiatry and other alternatives to therapy in the late 1970s, including the holistic approach of Gestalt psychotherapy which appealed to Robertson.<sup>85</sup> Gestalt emphasised the importance of taking responsibility for life choices and addressing ‘the here and now.’<sup>86</sup> (Robertson repeats this mantra in Reel 23 as she attempts automatic writing and—with characteristic irony—removes herself from the here and now by providing a reflective, retrospective voiceover).<sup>87</sup> Feminist therapists used Gestalt therapy to promote women’s ‘personal power’ and use of assertive language.<sup>88</sup> Although helpful to numerous women, including Robertson at times, such self-help initiatives emphasised the individual and did little to address structural issues of social equality. The rhetoric of responsibility put pressure on personal failing. Robertson’s interest in self-help, then, may have ‘saved my life,’ as she said, but also plays into neoliberalism’s promotion of individual responsibility—a promotion that came to characterise much therapeutic provision available to Robertson in the 1970s and 80s. Such a privatisation of stress haunted Robertson, and yet she absorbed the vocabularies of ‘self-improvement’ and ‘human potential,’ muddling them in the *Diary*’s soundtrack until they become a chorus of competing optimisms and reproaches. In such instances, it becomes unclear whether the garden is really the radical space of political ecology it promises to be, or a temporary refuge for one person, and innocuous to the presiding structural regime. Gardening might even bolster the regime by keeping an activist relatively quiet and distracted.

With its seeds in the late 1970s, the ‘Me Decade,’ the *Diary* witnesses Robertson seeking self-help in pop-psychologies, Zen Buddhism, Catholicism, astrology, Goddess mythology, and various diets and exercise regimes.<sup>89</sup> Her restless shuttling between these pursuits is as telling as any one allegiance. The *Diary* also displays the influence of numerous, conflicting, ideas regarding gender, combining domestic ideals Robertson absorbed during childhood with socialist and pacifist feminist influences from the 60s, consciousness-raising methods from the 70s, and ideas about goddess worship, and assertiveness training, borrowed from hippie and corporate feminisms in the 80s.

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<sup>85</sup> Carolyn Zerbe Enns, *Feminist Theories and Feminist Psychotherapies: Origins, Themes, and Variations* (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press, 1997), 138.

<sup>86</sup> Staub, *Madness* 151.

<sup>87</sup> Reel 23 A Breakdown (and) After the Mental Hospital (1 September to 13 December 1982)

<sup>88</sup> Frederick S. Perls, et al. *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (New York: Delta Book, 1951)

<sup>89</sup> Robertson owned several Joyce Vedral exercise and self-help videos; in 1984 she visited Lily Dale Retreat Center, New York (which advertises itself as ‘the World’s Largest Center for the Science, Philosophy and Religion of Spiritualism’); in 1981 Robertson was reading the I Ching; in 1982, practicing Gestalt Therapy techniques of automatic writing to stay ‘in the moment’; in 1984, reading Carl Jung and Darlene Ehrenberg; and in 1985, R. D. Laing (writing in her notebook that she was discovering her own ‘private illogic’)

Given such restlessness, Robertson constitutes a somewhat problematic figure within the Second Wave, and a challenge to historical periodisation. Though she attended various feminist rallies in the Boston and New York areas throughout the 1970s and 80s, some of which we see in the *Diary*, Robertson's desire to be a wife and mother could be seen as antagonistic to Second Wave goals for domestic liberation.<sup>90</sup> Obsessive crushes on men, ambivalence over abortion, and a preoccupation with weight-loss and beauty regimens, also position Robertson ambiguously within feminist politics and filmmaking. Put simply, Robertson was not interested in overturning the domestic environment or the institution of the nuclear family. She filmed the gazebo in her mother's garden season after season, wishing to be married in it. In response to what Robertson felt was her failure to start a family, she (re)produced herself as a persona and project, and produced excessive amounts of horticultural, culinary, and filmic material to keep her company (during one week of September, recording '65 pounds of green tomatoes, 15 pounds of red tomatoes, 6 cabbages, 5 summer squash and 8 pounds of peppers').<sup>91</sup> Frequently filming herself composting food waste was another means, alongside maintaining a garden and diary, by which Robertson reproduced in accordance with natural cycles of decay and regeneration, by day, month and season, establishing poignant parallels with menstruation and pregnancy.

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<sup>90</sup> Feminist self-help groups and clinics spread fast during that time; in the Boston area alone, more than a dozen feminist therapy organisations were established. In 1983, Robertson attended The Seneca Women's Encampment for a Future of Peace and Justice, a women-only peace camp formed to protest the scheduled deployment of missiles. In 1989, Robertson attended a March for Women's Rights in Washington DC and campaigned for abortion and birth control with Framingham Coalition for Choice.

<sup>91</sup> Garden list dated 28 September (year unknown). In 1993, Robertson was growing no fewer than 31 types of tomato, according to a written note and photograph of the tomatoes brought indoors for cooking.



Tomato harvest (photograph)  
COURTESY OF THE ANNE CHARLOTTE ROBERTSON COLLECTION, HARVARD FILM ARCHIVE, HARVARD COLLEGE LIBRARY.

But, just as we think Robertson is becoming overwhelmed by desires for romance, domesticity, or motherhood, she talks back. ‘On a Saturday night I’d come home with dates,’ she says in a voiceover, ‘and eat them all.’ The camera leers over a plate of date pits in a wry pun. Through performatively failing at domestic goals, searching for her ‘true love,’ winning a ‘war against weight’ or becoming ‘more beautiful and more sane,’ Robertson ridicules their social manufacture, and insistent, oppressive force.<sup>92</sup> In *Magazine Mouth* (1983), a seven-minute stop-motion film set to military-parade music, oral consumption represents Robertson’s stimulation and disgust by television and print media. A photograph of Robertson’s face with a hole cut out for her mouth is superimposed over images of supermarkets, manicured women, and suburbia, giving the effect that she is eating and vomiting a collaged American Dream. Robertson thus wrests political agency and humour from melancholy, carving out a standpoint that simultaneously acknowledges and resists a set of socially constitutive gazes. Irony and wordplay disarm images charged with constitutive force (the gazebo that houses ideals of marriage). Robertson plays one determination (hopeful bride) off against another (wry feminist) in a way that does not cancel either but draws them into tension.<sup>93</sup> The lasting impression is one of ambivalence: it is unclear whether Robertson is parodying, or falling prey to, essentialist and gendered tropes of selfhood and nature.

## Cultivating alternative growth models, or: Making compost

It is also unclear whether Robertson critiques or succumbs to ideas and ideals of productivity that haunt her life and work. In Reel 1 of the *Diary*, she films a squash on which she has painted eyes and a mouth. The same squash lies in the compost seconds later, rotten. A similar scene of decay is poignantly rendered in her 1985 short film *Rotting Pumpkin*. Here Robertson paints a woman’s face on a pumpkin whose decomposition is documented in time-lapse over several weeks. The film is a self-portrait, the pumpkin its memento mori. Robertson was only 36, but already we witness her panic at aging and not finding her ‘other half’ or ‘one true love.’<sup>94</sup> Composting represents both an act of burial for her youth, and a strategy to come to terms with ideas of decay and its regenerative possibilities. In these compost scenes, introspective worries about aging are metabolised into meditations on larger, natural cycles of decay, growth, and sustainability.

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<sup>92</sup> Reel 23: A Breakdown (and) After the Mental Hospital (1 September to 23 December 1982); Reel 80 Emily Died (14 May to 26 September 1994)

<sup>93</sup> Kathi Weeks, *Constituting Feminist Subjects* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998) 144-7.

<sup>94</sup> In Reel 23 Robertson films an episode of mania in which she searches for this hypothetical husband on the streets of Boston, en route to collect her welfare check. Reel 23 A Breakdown (and) After the Mental Hospital (1 September to 13 December 1982)

In such sequences, and throughout the *Diary*, Robertson's body and garden thus become terrains on which she expresses concern both about herself and the environment—indeed, demarcations between land and body, composting and dieting, and biodiversity and metabolic health, are constantly blurred. Robertson understood that neoliberalist models of economic prosperity affected human bodies and natural landscapes at once. Such models promoted a slim figure perceived to be in control of her body and able to eat wisely in an environment of fast-food excess—and this plagued Robertson. So too did what she understood to be unsustainable rates of natural resource extraction, waste combustion, and landfill that were altering the landscape around Boston. Reel 42 features scenes of industrial wastelands from Godfrey Reggio's 1982 environmentalist polemic *Koyaanisqatsi* (its title is a Hopi word that means 'life out of balance') to amplify alarm at ecological threat.<sup>95</sup> Composting her own food waste was Robertson's small-scale method for regeneration and sustainable growth—it constituted her alternative, ecological economy.

The word ecology relates to economy: both derive from *oikos*, the Greek word for house. Ecology is the study of interactions between living organisms and their material surroundings in the 'house' that is the environment. On a micro level, economy is the science of household management and, on a macro level, this science extends to national or global scales to consider the extraction, production, and distribution of resources. Ecology and economy, then, both concern resources. Robertson was fascinated by resources, particularly those she was able to produce in her garden or kitchen, and economise through preservation (by pickling, for example, or turning them into baked goods), and by bingeing and purging.

Food preparation, consumption, and purging form a constant battleground in the *Diary*. In a notebook from 1979, Robertson announces that 'hunger is a metaphor.' In Reel 80 of the *Diary*, she declares 'war against weight.'<sup>96</sup> Reel 2 of the *Diary* begins with scenes of Robertson sitting before the camera in her kitchen, reading aloud dictionary definitions of the words 'fat' and 'thin.' These words wield considerable normative power, but this power is ambiguous, culturally specific. Robertson frantically shells peanuts as she reads, her voice growing intentionally hysterical in pitch and speed. She seems both amused and haunted by the definitions' references to success, failure, fecundity, poverty, wealth, excess.<sup>97</sup> Robertson had intended that the *Diary* document her weight-loss during the autumn of 1981. As Thanksgiving and Christmas arrived, however, the project changed. Robertson had begun 'with 5 rolls film, thought would be sufficient to show weight loss, one scene each day in costume,

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<sup>95</sup> Reel 42 Christmas '84, New Year '85 + Gaining Weight (25 December 1984 to 10 March 1985)

<sup>96</sup> Reel 80 Emily Died (14 May to 26 September 1994)

<sup>97</sup> Writing about this Reel, Robertson reflected: 'In the thirties, 'fat' meant something good. It meant plump, pleasing [...] the best part of your work is a 'fat' job and 'thin' had a lot of opprobrium attached: meager, of slender means.'

instead – gained weight, took off costume.<sup>98</sup> The *Diary* continued for 16 years. Throughout, compost-bins and cooked meals are filmed again and again, often with sudden zooms that mimic obsessive weight-watching.<sup>99</sup> Throughout the 1980s Robertson kept written ‘Food Diaries’ of her consumption and exercise regimes (she includes garden activities of weeding and mulching as work-outs). By Reels 81 and 83 of the *Diary* (recorded between 1995 and 1997) Robertson is evidently overweight. She films herself standing beside a handmade sign reading 236 (her weight in pounds). We see her hip, waist and chest measurements on cards tacked onto the dressing-table mirror to her right. At her lightest adult weight, Robertson had weighed 123 pounds. Through these filmed and written weigh-ins, she renders herself a quantifiable and temporalised unit, an assembly-line product subject to quality-control.<sup>100</sup> In *Magazine Mouth*, glossy images cut from magazines are animated into a frenzy. Jellybeans pour out of a picture of Robertson’s mouth in saccharine colours. Depicting herself eating a world of advertisements, and swallowing handfuls of confectionery and medication, Robertson uses humorous orality as a biting expression of socio-political frustration. The digestive system becomes a political system in revolt.

The hungry self was Robertson’s political project, a personal ecosystem and economy subject to gluts and scarcities. Although drawing a straightforward causal relation between late capitalism and Robertson’s preoccupation with food risks simplified economic determinism, paying some consideration to the interests of capitalists, and to the changing nature of the processes of production and consumption, is surely appropriate.<sup>101</sup> Capitalism structures experience in order that we satisfy its imperatives of production and consumption. Regulation occurs through a ‘psychologisation’ of everyday life via ‘experts’ who guide the lifestyle choices of consumers.<sup>102</sup>

In characteristically ambivalent self-awareness, Robertson parodies the figure of a diet-obsessed woman. She speeds up footage of herself cooking and eating in the *Diary* until she is a robotic caricature, then films herself manically exercising, in attempt to purge the calories consumed from these kitchen-garden concoctions. In many scenes she wears a yellow leotard and a grimace, sometimes holding her camera in one hand and lifting weights with the other.<sup>103</sup> Such comic industriousness offers a gendered critique by playing with the idea that multitasking is a ‘skill’ traditionally attributed

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<sup>98</sup> Robertson was inspired in this approach by the nude self-portraits of Eleanor Antin. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema* 2 208. Other artists and filmmakers engaged in producing nude self-portraits of body transformations at that time include Adrian Piper, Lynn Hershman Leeson, and Ana Mendieta.

<sup>99</sup> See for example Reels 1, 2, 3, 9, 22, 23.

<sup>100</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Katherine Morris, ‘Body Image Disorders’, in Fulford (ed.) 592–611.

<sup>101</sup> For more on the benefits and dangers of applying Marxist readings to mental disorders, see Jane Busfield, *Managing Madness: Changing Ideas and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1989) 130-139.

<sup>102</sup> Joel Kovel, ‘The American Mental Health Industry,’ in Ingleby (ed.); Busfield, *Men, Women and Madness* 67.

<sup>103</sup> In Reel 80, for example, Robertson is seen ‘lifting weights, doing the Insanity Fat-Burning Workout, by Joyce Vedral. Trying to lose weight.’ (27 September 1994 - 29 January 1995); Reel 5: Mourning (23 to 30 January 1982)

to women. The critique resonates with the German artist Margaret Raspé's camera-helmet films, made in the early 1970s. Raspé documented food preparation from a live, first-person perspective by mounting a Super-8 camera onto a hard-hat—in a nod to male industrial workers' protective attire (and male artists' appropriations of it). Raspé's camera-helmet films propose the idea of Woman as a domestic appliance (or, as Raspé called it, a *Frautomat*).<sup>104</sup> Robertson does not go so far as to attach her Super-8 camera to her head, but the camera becomes both part of her own body, and a societal gaze she has internalised. *I must grow food*, Robertson seems to say, *but I must not grow fat myself*.

The *Diary*, meanwhile, grew and grew, expanding beyond its five-year promise, and further still, beyond a decade, beyond 10, 20, 30 hours, as an unwieldy, organic body of work. The *Diary* both excited and overwhelmed Robertson by its unusual and unpredicted volume. As a body of work, it resembled Robertson's own, expanding body. Robertson was evidently fascinated (though also plagued) by her very biological, massy, messy body. This feeling of ambivalence pervades the *Diary* and contributes to the sense that Robertson is neither happy with the consumerist society in which she finds herself, nor able to reject it. Robertson's body, and body of work, represent alternative models of growth to normative economic ones, yet they also hint at her susceptibility to ideals of productivity aligned with professional output and fecundity, and her fear of failure at being slim or beautiful by normative standards.

It is this ambivalence that ensures that materials and substances filmed in the *Diary* and Robertson's short films remain unpredictable—sometimes they seem wondrous, as in the compost, and other times, terrifying. In Reel 2, stop-motion eliminates Robertson's hand in the work of bread-making, foregrounding the yeast as a magically growing substance. But in *Magazine Mouth*, Jellybeans appear to leave Robertson's mouth and fly around with threatening speed and autonomy. They resemble medical tablets, and anticipate a sequence in Reel 80 where Robertson again uses stop-motion to animate a row of pill bottles identified in the voice-over as Risperdal, Cogentin, Valium, and Benedril. The bottles advance across the table-top towards us as agents of oppression. Even the very material substances surrounding Robertson speak to her experiences of conflicting impulses.

When seen in a marathon screening, as Robertson preferred, the *Diary* comes to resemble a peculiar kind of brain, responsive to and responsible for its surroundings, comprising a network of neural junctions, a mass of vulnerable synapses. Its layered soundtrack and rapid cuts represent the brain's competing impulses. The brain is a highly plastic organ that can learn and adapt. The question

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<sup>104</sup> Marina Vishmidt, 'The Two Reproductions in (Feminist) Art and Theory since the 1970s,' *Third Text*, 31, 1 (2017) 62. Land Artists and sculptors including Carl Andre and Richard Serra used protective workwear. For more on multi-tasking, see Shira Offer and Barbara Schneider, 'Revisiting the gender gap in time-use patterns: Multitasking and well-being among mothers and fathers in dual-earner families,' *American Sociological Review*, 76, 6 (2011) 809-833. For Raspé's work, see for example the 8-minute film *Schweineschnitzel* (1971) which documents the artist prepare the eponymous foodstuff, coating ground meat in egg and breadcrumbs.

the *Diary* poses is what should we do with our brains, when faced with conflicting influences, and when being adaptable is society's mantra.

Plasticity is a term used in neuroscientific contexts to describe the brain—but capitalism has mobilised it, converting cerebral into sociopolitical discourse in order to naturalise its own procedures for networking and accelerating mechanisms of flexible production and consumption.<sup>105</sup> Throughout the 1980s, management developed a vocabulary of scientific phrases to encourage people to work in 'flexible, neural groups.'<sup>106</sup> Reagan exulted 'flexible markets' in 1986.<sup>107</sup> To 'liberate profits,' Thatcher led her Conservative government to promote a market that was 'more flexible and responsive.'<sup>108</sup> Studying neural plasticity in precisely this context, Catherine Malabou inserts an important critical consideration of power relations by asking 'what should we do with our brain?'—that is, what should we do to ensure that our supple consciousness does not simply bend to the spirit of capitalism?<sup>109</sup> We need flexibility in order to learn new skills, but flexibility can also make us vulnerable to manipulation. The brain is responsive to (formed by) and responsible for (gives form to) ethical, aesthetic, and political forces. What we must do, Malabou continues, is consider what kinds of culture and society best create 'neural liberation' What kinds of world do we want our thoughts and actions to be supple to?<sup>110</sup> Alongside the *Diary*, Robertson's composting resembles another, earthy kind of brain, absorbing different elements, and growing with their affects, energies, conflicts.

## Companion planting: cultivating complexity

The *Diary* shows that everyone is shaped by her membership (or exclusion) from the many, and every 'many' exists only through its formation of individuals. It shows that hyper-individualism is a dangerous fantasy. It shows that 'we' and 'I' are mutually constitutive, and mutually vulnerable. Like the community and suburban gardens in which Robertson worked—on common land where neighbours, vegetables, fruit, flowers, and animals shared resources—the *Diary* cultivates a subjectivity prefaced on multi-species communication and community. Robertson personifies flowers as her children throughout the *Diary*, greets the moon, or, in Reel 22, films a little slug in close-up as she explains that it came in on a lettuce from her garden and caused many hours of deliberation because

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<sup>105</sup> Malabou, *What*; Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005) 73-90.

<sup>106</sup> Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit* 115.

<sup>107</sup> Reagan in Michael J. Piore, 'A Critique of Reagan's Labor Policy,' *Challenge*, 29, 1 (1986) 48.

<sup>108</sup> 'The Right Approach' (Conservative policy statement), *Conservative Central Office* (October 1976) 30-31.

<sup>109</sup> Malabou, *What* 14.

<sup>110</sup> Malabou, *What* 30.

she couldn't decide on the perfect place to put it. Such scenes display a radically inclusive empathy. Robertson knows that plants are living beings in a multi-species community, but she also knows that she has more agency than they do: she can dig them up, leave them, water them, eat them. This unusual responsiveness becomes ethical and ecological responsibility. Robertson documents processes like pollination to demonstrate that ecology is prefaced on symbiosis, not separation. The garden is a landscape (recalling *landscape's* etymology as a sheaf or relationship of many) where elements correspond with each other in what Tim Ingold describes as a form of responsibility dependent on responsiveness.<sup>111</sup> Robertson's notebooks abound with lists and diagrams where plant names, plans for seeding or harvest, cooking ingredients, film notes, and reminders for self-care share page space. In editing notes Robertson made in 1984, such lists carry uppercase conjunctions 'and' and 'with,' framed in boxes, crowded across and down the page. On another page, she writes that she is 'Going to get up/ early like the/ bees + pollinate/ the cucumbers!' Such documents reveal Robertson's ontological expansiveness. Responsive to her surroundings, she took on (sometimes overwhelming) responsibility for environmental and social justice. While she did not find a romantic companion, Robertson did cultivate a form of companionship with multiple species, with her own body as a site of work, and with her filming-gardening work itself.

This approach recalls companion planting, a common technique in organic gardening. Companion planting promotes natural habitats, growth, and pollination by cultivating different crops in proximity to one another. In order to thrive, roses are planted with garlic, because garlic deters rose pests. Marigolds are planted with melons because they control nematodes in the roots of melon. Tomatoes repel larvae that chew through cabbages. The companion-planted garden is neither a field of individuals, nor a monoculture crop—it is a complex cluster of species growing alone and together.

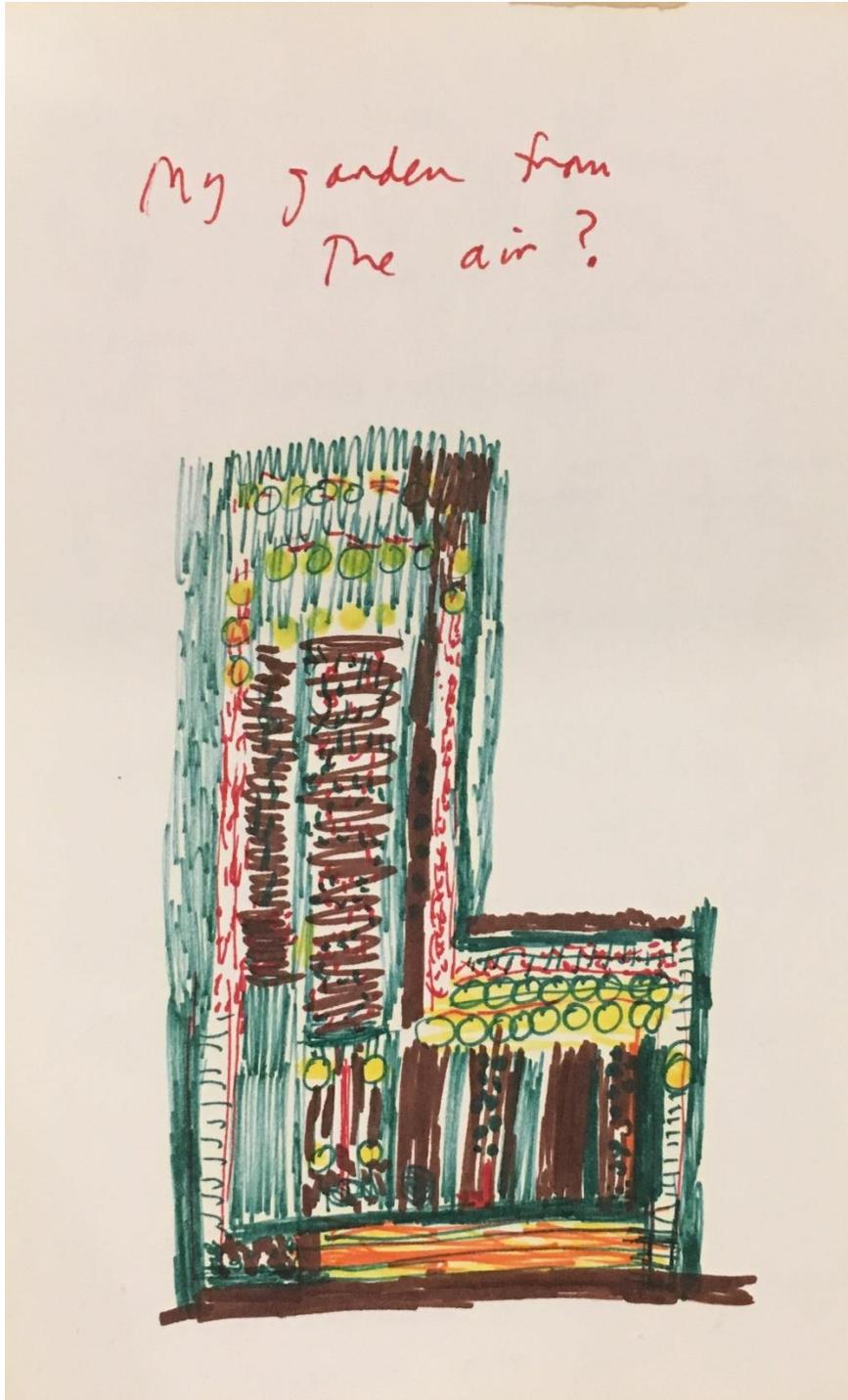
Companion planting as a metaphor helps us read Robertson's work and life in the reparative way Sedgwick recommends, in terms that preserve conflict, complexities, and ambivalences. Robertson offers a germane way of thinking through the particular demands of living an ethical, ecological life within late capitalism. Her life and work are at once idiosyncratic and painfully relatable. The experiences she chronicles persist today as we struggle to practice a socially and ecologically inclusive ethics of cohabitation within a system clogged with anti-social and extractive practices, and anthropocentric hubris. Scenarios for imagining the future seem devastating or utopian, and rarely possible.

I turn another page. Resting above a garden planting plan (coloured in felt-pens, a bed of pink flowers labelled: 'pale as a drift of wood-smoke') is a single hair. I think it is Robertson's. Though now

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<sup>111</sup>Tim Ingold, *Correspondences* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020) 12.

in the archive and not the garden, Robertson's corpus of work remains embodied, organic, and alive. The reason for her work's vivaciousness is not only because of its massive, unwieldy presence, I think, but also due to its startling anticipation of where we're at today. Robertson's life and work anticipate our greatest challenge—that of uncovering what divisions between humans and non-humans have obscured and, accepting that we share one planet, cultivating greater responsiveness and responsibility during our time on it.



Anne Charlotte Robertson, *Garden from the air*, undated drawing. Photograph by Becca Voelcker.  
COURTESY OF THE ANNE CHARLOTTE ROBERTSON COLLECTION, HARVARD FILM ARCHIVE, HARVARD COLLEGE LIBRARY.

**Bio**

Dr Becca Voelcker earned her PhD in the Department of Art, Film, and Visual Studies at Harvard University in 2021. Her dissertation, *Land Cinema in the Neoliberal Age*, studies a global corpus of films made by gardener-filmmakers and farmer-filmmakers in the 1970s and 80s that constitute contributions to Leftist and environmental thought. She is currently a postdoctoral researcher at Central Saint Martins in London.

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