



Grace Ndiritu, 'The Compassionate Rebels: Tools for Everyday Living Part 1'; Page Not Found. Photo by Ieva Maslinskaitė, courtesy of Grace Ndiritu and Page Not Found.

Meditating on Togetherness with Grace Ndiritu at Page Not Found

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recensie

Grace Ndiritu's new work *The Compassionate Rebels: Tools for Everyday Living Part 1* is both a film installation and a moment to bring the experiments featured in her reissued book: *Being Together — A Manual for Living*, to the fore. Anastasia Shin visits the exhibition and a meditation led by the artist, where intuition and rationality become one.

A video projection and two round rugs printed with enlarged photographic archive images fill the space of Page Not Found. The installation is surrounded by four big windows, covered with black and white imagery of crowds of people with banners. These images are semi-translucent; from the inside you look out through this lens of history's visual archive; of welfare and land rights protests. From the outside—at least on a dark winter night—they glow like large light boxes activated by the shadows moving within.

In the window images, specific groups are marching and gathering: for land rights with Indigenous Australian communities in 1977, and for the 'Poor People's Campaign' that Martin Luther King called for in D.C. in 1968. These events are not explicitly addressed or referred to by the film or in the book, instead carrying a more symbolic or associative force to the space. Ndiritu describes architecture as a 'spiritual technology.' Inserted into the windows in this way, the images affirm the power of the collective, inspiring a public towards solidarity and commonality amidst increasing societal division.

Ndiritu tells me that, during install, some locals were struck by the protest images on the windows, and especially by the placard—*Our children go to bed hungry*—perhaps because this still rings true for so many children around the world, including the 14% of children in the Hague who live at risk of poverty, almost twice the Dutch national index of 7.8.[1]

THEMA'S
EDUCATIE
ENGAGEMENT
PROTEST
RITUELEN
SPIRITUALITEIT



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Ndiritu's artistic practice is influenced by her upbringing in an activist household and her commitment to esoteric knowledge. Structures of ritual: shamanic, Buddhist and spiritual, influence the events she facilitates in her work, including the current series at Page Not Found. The Buddhist identification of 'Socially Benefitting Activities' has had an early influence on Ndiritu's work. At a teaching that the artist attended in Northern India, the Dalai Lama ignited the idea for Ndiritu that she could create positive change through her artistic practice. Besides having an aesthetic quality, her practice could encompass the ongoing learning and values of collectivity and compassion that she had been missing up until that point. With her solo show *The Compassionate Rebels: Tools for Everyday Living Part 1*, these inspired beliefs are at play, put into action through the dispersion of her book, and the workshops: *Writing Together* and *Decolonising Together*, *Designing Together*, and *Growing Together*.

I arrive to see the show on a quiet afternoon before the evening's event. Eight red cushions are laid out per circular carpet, that even as the evening crowd descends, provide a spacious intimacy. We sit in an extended singular circle that encompasses both protest carpets depicting two events. From one carpet, titled *BLACK POWER*, a face beams out at us with fist in the air. From the other, *APG*, fifteen people in dark colours crowd around the surface of a table, focussed into the centre. The round rugs—Ndiritu's 'protest carpets'—already evoke the idea of gatherings with purpose and presence. I think of sit-ins in universities and elsewhere.

We make the commitment to engage by first taking off our shoes and crossing the threshold of bookshop to exhibition space. Stepping from concrete to lino, the aesthetic is institutional and the layout symbolic. There are a couple of seats at a table with selected books, including the new 'manual for living' and a revolution reader near the far window. The projection screen, playing Ndiritu's performance film: *EVENT STRUCTURE* (2022), hangs diagonally facing out at us from the corner. We are due to meditate, listen and converse in this space, and it strikes me how—unlike the minimal zen evoked in many places designed for calm contemplation—we are situated within the abundance of inspirational contextual imagery and alongside shelves lined with books. Like a Tibetan Buddhist temple, which often stacks the Sutras (ancient texts) in cabinets along one wall with stories told through bright paintings on the rest, the translucent protest images bring an awareness of possible (compassionate) collective action into the space.

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The meditation we begin with invites us to follow our breath without controlling it. Ndiritu's instructions are simple and sparse, her voice mellow and easy to follow. I know that I enjoy the contradictorily social yet introverted experience of turning your senses inward and following instructions, from yoga classes. Even though I've been teaching yoga for 15 years and could just as well be practicing alone at home, there is something tangible in the togetherness, and in being one amongst many. *EVENT STRUCTURE* (2022) the film recorded in artist John Latham's house, features a similar idea to this, depicting another group sitting around another carpet with Grace Ndiritu. One participant observes: 'my body is actually made up with the same particles that make up this carpet or that tree or anything. This idea of decentering yourself [...] realising that you're only part of your bigger picture.'

Togetherness *is* tangible but still hard to describe. Perhaps because, like other artistic pedagogical projects that encourage dual judgements (both educational and artistic) this artwork also draws on activist/spiritual/educational settings and the multiple perceptive modes they employ. Ndiritu brings different facets of engagement and knowledge into the exhibition and bookshop space for participants to experience collectively. She tells me this is an important part of bringing both hemispheres of the brain together in her work: both the rational and the intuitive.

The 'spiritual' which I would describe as: a wordless sense, definitely not rational or calculated, only has 'meaning' in a space where judgment doesn't flatten it. You can be critical of the spiritual but engaging in this mode simultaneously eradicates the possibility of its (suspended-judgement) experience—so a choice is required in the moment—which perceptive faculties will you engage? By taking in the still and moving images, listening to fragments of reading, making associations, feeling the physical sensation of breath moving through the nostrils and allowing imagination to start to stretch, we utilize these different sides of the brain alternately.

The participatory element to Grace Ndiritu's work and her focus on 'socially benefitting activities' situate it at the interstices of pedagogic and activist work. More than a 'situational' or 'relational' aesthetic of contemporary art gone by where communal conviviality might have been enough, Ndiritu seeks a quieter connection and presence from the self-selected attendees.



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I am glad to have attended the event Grace Ndiritu facilitated to have the 'live' experience to draw upon and to broaden the forms of engagement her work invites to include an analytical-hindsight too. No doubt some in the group may have found it difficult to 'drop in' to the different perceptive modes addressed within the session. Yet, with an awareness of what would take place; as a self-selected audience and so for the most part willing and compliant; we went with it...

Spiritual experience is beyond the subjective, existing outside of subject/object, space/time coordinates, and it often relies on guidance or parameters pre-set by existing practices or rituals. In Grace Ndiritu's presence, I find myself persuaded that this alternating perceptive engagement her work invites, is not contradictory but harmonious. The simplicity of breath-based meditation has its scientifically proven effects, while also changing your sense of self, time, and place: this is the way in which it's radical. Sitting or walking in this group and 'dropping in' to the sensory experience of breathing means allowing the sheaths of difference to (temporarily) fall away; giving a new context to togetherness.

As we walk, clockwise and circular, around the two protest carpets with our eyes mostly closed and proprioception on high, I realise that we are circumambulating—participating in a collective action which again borrows from Buddhism—circling around a sacred object. What's sacred here is what's centred—symbolically and actively—a form of togetherness (made increasingly scarce) and the idea of disparate groups coming together around a central cause.

Compassionate Rebels introduces communal moments which require a very specific kind of attention and commitment, orchestrated within the 'spiritual technology' of this exhibition's architecture. Here, it's *as much* about what sense of perception or mode of judgement you take with you; in future contexts of togetherness to come.

[1] <https://longreads.cbs.nl/the-netherlands-in-numbers-2021/how-many-families-are-at-risk-of-poverty/> Accessed 30.01.2025

The exhibition *The Compassionate Rebels: Tools for Everyday Living Part 1*, is open until the 23rd of March

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