

# ECOLABS

Ecolabs: Dr. Joanna Boehnert (officially) / Jody

Location: itinerant

Operative since: 2006

Practice organised as a: originally an association, now in transition to a new model

<http://www.eco-labs.org/>

EcoLabs is a non-profit organisation founded by Jody Boehnert in 2006. It primarily mobilises tools of visual communication in order to foster ecological literacy and bring people together who care about environmental issues.

What desires, values and elements of support/discouragement made your practice evolve over time?

EcoLabs is an amorphous entity that aspired to be and do these following things:  
a laboratory for design and critical pedagogy for ecological learning and social change  
a design studio specialising in the visual communication of complex ideas  
a research programme investigating environmental problems and solutions  
a network connecting people with interests in ecology and social justice  
an organisation that produces projects, programmes and resources  
a centre for ecological literacy (especially in design education)  
a hub for critical thinking about environmental issues.

What, in your case, are the advantages and disadvantages, strengths and weaknesses of working alone?

Advantages: flexibility and responsiveness

Disadvantages: lack of support and financial insecurity

How do you deal with money and wages when you collaborate with other people on a project? How do you deal with tensions and power relations when participating in collaborative projects?

For the first few years, I attempted to raise money in order to pay people for projects run by EcoLabs. This was not very practical since everyone was paid but myself. For all my projects, I am mindful of non-hierarchical organisational methods and ways of collaborating artistically without reproducing power hierarchies. When one person has more expertise in a domain, or very strong feelings about something, temporary hierarchies can happen. I think this is okay.

How do you access meaningful commissioned work and how do you finance and carve-out time for self-initiated projects? What strategies and tactics are you making use of?

I apply for funding to make projects happen. I align myself with educational institutions and attempt to make use of funding streams that are available to these institutions. I write research proposals for practice-based research. I attempt to persuade people across various disciplines that design is a practice that can help them achieve their goals and that they need professional help. I do this with written work and presentations. I talk to groups about environmental communication design. I attempt to build bridges between disciplines using design. EcoLabs is a non-profit organisation that provides many resources and services for free, but this does not mean we can help everyone with requests for consultancy and/or design. One rule of thumb is that we will never work for free if the person who asks us for help is being paid. If this is you, and you do not have a budget, consider either splitting your wage

with us, or just read the free resources we provide online.

How do you organise your time between work and non-work? What systems do you use to keep track of where you invest your time?

I keep a calendar and many timesheets.

How does your current working and living environment (geographic location, spatial arrangement) reflect (or otherwise) the ethos, methods and dynamics of your practice?

For the first seven years, EcoLabs was located in a flat in central Brixton, London, on a road of Victorian flats that has been squatted from the 1970s. I completed an AHRC-funded PhD at the University of Brighton during this time. We had to leave the flat in 2013 after squatting was criminalised in the UK. I found a new temporary job in Colorado at the Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences as a visiting researcher and so I moved to Boulder.

In this flat the ideological assumptions of the prevailing mindset, or consensus reality, were not hegemonic. This sounds very grandiose for a project that involves a website, posters, essays and a few events. Still, EcoLabs is a place where emergent ecological epistemologies are acknowledged, communicated and put into practice as much as possible. This is a design practice that aims to make viable futures possible in a world largely alienated from its own ecological context. It's a grandiose idea because the challenges are so severe.

In Colorado, I moved into a tiny, blue house made from reclaimed wood in the mountains outside of Boulder. I liked the idea of living in this tiny, low impact space in the mountains, but just a few weeks after I arrived in Colorado, a major flood occurred and I realised that that it was entirely impractical to live in the mountains without a car and have to go to work, so I had to move into Boulder. I do drive but I attempt to travel by bike as much as possible. I have also gone many years without flying, although I have been flying over the last few years. Since I left London, I am looking for a new permanent base for EcoLabs. Ultimately, I agree with Wendell Berry: "Stop somewhere... and begin the thousand-year-long process of knowing that place".

Please draw a diagram of all the elements and structures that support your design practice (monetary & non-monetary resources, people, spaces and institutions, family, other assets, ...) Can you note how these elements support you and the flows of exchange related to them? Can you also include elements that “threaten” your practice?

