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BOOKS

Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens help writer assume the 'Ecosexual Position'

Tony Bravo | December 24, 2021 Updated: January 3, 2022, 9:09 am

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Annie Sprinkle (left) and Beth Stephens, performers, writers and ecosexual activists, blow the seeds from dandelions during a hike at Holly Park in San Francisco in October. Photo: Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

Visiting Holly Park in San Francisco with Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens one day this fall wasn't just an afternoon walk; it was fulfilling the prescription for my first ecosexual experience.

Sprinkle, an artist, performer and well-known sexologist, and Stephens, a filmmaker and professor of art at UC Santa Cruz, were giddy as they enlightened me to all the sensual ways I could engage with the environment. The couple, who married in Canada in 2007, are bedecked in swirls of sequins, chiffon and velvet from Haight-Ashbury's Piedmont Boutique, looking like a cross between water sprites and burlesque performers in the afternoon sun.

Sprinkle and Stephens encouraged me to let go of the tensions of civilization, then invited me to lie facedown on the lawn for my first ecosexual act: "grassalingus." (It's just as it sounds: orally engaging with the turf.)

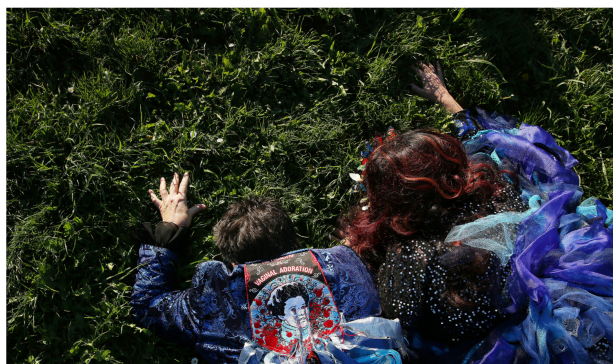
Sprinkle and Stephens dived face-first into the green, tasting the grass and feeling the blades against their faces. I followed, letting the grass tickle my lips, though I was not brave enough to swallow.

"Do you feel the sun penetrating you?" Sprinkle inquired.

Stephens then asked what I was experiencing: I described the smell of dirt, the essence of plant life invading my nostrils and the breeze caressing my skin, which Stephens called "wind play."

They encouraged me to press my body into the ground. Sprinkle then asked if I'm a "top or a bottom" in the experience, something I needed to contemplate. (Maybe I'm a switch?)

"Pressing your body against the Earth is really powerful to do it consciously," said Stephens.



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ONE A DAY



Annie Sprinkle (left) and Beth Stephens, performers, writers and ecosexual activists, lie on the grass at Holly Park as they show their passion for the environment during an ecosexual hike in October.
Photo: Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

We moved from the grass to the trees, where Stephens and Sprinkle pointed out how a number of them have branches that fork out in ways that resemble legs, giving the trees a kind of "crotch." A few times, they embraced the trees.

Sprinkle also noted that many use the term "tree hugger" as a pejorative to describe environmentalists and activists. She and Stephens find that terminology to be part of both the dismissal of the environment and the fear of sex that run rampant in Western culture. Destigmatizing both is at the core of the ecosexual movement.

Ecosexuality, sometimes known as "sexecology," is a form of environmental activism that Sprinkle and Stephens have been practicing since 2008. The concept is about exploring sensuality in nature and thinking of the Earth as a "lover" instead of the go-to personification of Earth as mother, or worse. Ecosexuality does not have to be about sex per se but rather, being inspired and "turned on" by the natural world.

Sprinkle and Stephens use all the artistic tools available to them as part of the movement: Their tours, films and workshops involve visual art, performance, storytelling and other media, all frequently invoking earlier artistic movements like Absurdism, Dada, Fluxus and the sex positivity Sprinkle is known for in her work as an adult film performer and sex worker.

In 2008, the couple "married" the Earth in a performance art event among the redwoods in Santa Cruz. Since then, they've joined in eco-unions with the sun, the ocean and Bernal Hill, among others.

"For me, it's about pleasure activism, an extension of the work I started at 18 years old," said Sprinkle, now 67. "In this world that's full of violence, let there be pleasure and let it begin with us. When we teach an ecosexual workshop, we're blown away by the kind of innocence to it. There's a lot of laughter and so much beauty and power."

"Fear can be motivating, but it can also be very wearing, as can anger," said Stephens, 61. "Our movement is about getting into a place where you understand there's beauty, it's this beautiful being that we want to make flourish."

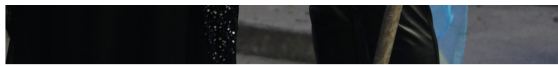
What ecosexuality is not about, said Stephens, is humans as Earth's saviors.

"We can't do that. It's often such a Christian-driven idea, that you can save something else," Stephens continued, but "to be in relationship with the Earth is really important to us."

This year, much of the pair's ecosexual work has come to fruition. With Jennie Klein, Sprinkle and Stephens wrote "Assuming the Ecosexual Position: The Earth as Lover," a combination manifesto and manual for creating a more intimate relationship with the planet. The pair were awarded a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship for work on their film project, "Playing With Fire," a follow-up to 2017's ecosexual documentary "Water Makes Us Wet." And the Schlesinger Library at Harvard acquired Sprinkle's archive, including many of the pair's materials on ecosexuality.

Perhaps most significantly, the two also founded E.A.R.T.H. Lab S.F. (for Environmental Art Research Theory Happenings), an organization they plan to use to create art, host workshops and spread the ecosexual philosophy.





Annie Sprinkle (left) and Beth Stephens, performers, writers and ecosexual activists, pose for a portrait in their backyard in October in San Francisco.
Photo: Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

"We want to be of service to the world. That's really why we started the E.A.R.T.H. Lab S.F.," said Stephens. "We want to be of service to younger artists, to people who need a safe place to be embodied, to play, to experience nature. We're trying to make a place for people who are different in the environmental art movement."

My walk with Stephens and Sprinkle was the culmination of three days spent with the couple, beginning at a birthday celebration and book party for Stephens at their "neighborhood dyke bar" Wildside West. Among the guests in the bar's garden was burlesque artist and ecosexual Lady Monster, who dressed in a self-designed ensemble of fabric autumn leaves.

"My journey with Annie started as a sexual performance artist," said Lady Monster, who was a participant in Sprinkle and Stephens' weddings to the Earth and the sea. "As an ecosexual, we say Earth is our lover because it's a give-and-take. We're asking you to look at your relationship with the Earth and where do you fall on the spectrum: Are you ecocelibate? Are you ecosensual? Are you ecosexual?"

Tanya Augsburg, a professor of liberal studies and humanities at San Francisco State University who teaches a course on images of eroticism, has been a longtime chronicler of Stephens and Sprinkle's work.

"They're teaching the public about ecosexuality, loving the Earth and caring for each other and inclusivity in a way everyone can relate to," Augsburg said. "They've been at the forefront, ahead of the curve in a lot of their work. Now culture is finally catching up with them."



Annie Sprinkle, performer, writer and ecosexual activist, holds a clipboard with an Ecosex Clinic Prescription.
Photo: Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

The following day at a brunch hosted by Sprinkle and Stephens, I was evaluated for my own "ecosexual prescription," with questions about my overall mental health, my current state of mind (anxious since March 2020), and what elements and nature activities turned me on. Remembering a romantic night caught in a thunderstorm, I selected water and rain play.

My prescription: Go to Holly Park and hug the Earth, with a special note to wear flowers in my hair.

After our walk, Sprinkle and Stephens asked me how I felt after experiencing the world "through the ecosexual gaze." I said I was thirsty, something that confirmed for them that water was one of my key ecosexual elements.

After I told them about things I noticed through my new ecosexualized gaze over the past three days — the smell of damp earth at Wildside West, the way leaves of a tree felt brushing against my hand, the warmth of the sun on the back of my neck — they offered their clinical opinion: I could be a burgeoning ecosexual.

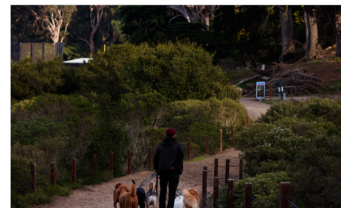
I admitted that I'd become, at the very least, ecocurious.



Tony Bravo

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