

## Creative Creatures

*The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.*

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### **# 21 / Ajay Revels, design researcher, New York City, New York**

Design researcher. Design ethnographer. Design anthropologist. Originally trained as a biologist to monitor ecosystems, Ajay Revels through her own New York company --aptly named: "Politemachines"-- conducts user experience research projects in order to improve the interaction design and UX of websites and mobile applications. She understands what people are trying to accomplish online and what gets in their way. "I use social science tools to study people going about in their daily lives in order to suggest processes, products or services. I believe that our systems, processes, machines, tools and even cities should serve and support our human endeavors, enrich our relationships, and not cause disruptive harm to the environment or cause unnecessary human stress."

Then, suddenly, Ajay was living all alone deep in a canyon in New Mexico. Her goal was to gather the pieces of her creative life and put the jigsaw puzzle together again. She used the concept of following the season, doing what everyone else in the natural world would be doing. "I dropped my leaves and fell into the nurturing soil of silence." When she worked as a biologist, her favorite tools were the microscope, magnifying lens and binoculars. The details of a tiny living being never ceased to excite and delight her. "In winter, there are few birds, no insects, and all plants are in suspended mode. I wanted to see the details of winter—what does hibernating, sleeping, resting look like? What is going on underground in holes and crevices, under the snow?"

Ajay stepped from the shuttle bus in front of Walgreen's in Espanola where I was waiting to take her to dead-end Cañones Canyon. She would stay through the winter in Felix and Grace Valdez's little cabin.

The Valdez forefathers were the first Hispanic settlers in the area; documents handwritten in solemn Spanish prove the Spanish Crown gave them a substantial Land Grant in 1742. The Valdez family still owns large tracts of valley and mountain ridges across from so-called 'Pueblo Mesa', where the ruins of an Anasazi town can be found if you take the trouble of a long and steep hike up. Grace and Felix, and a couple of their daughters, are traditional Rio Grande weavers who know all about natural plant dyes.

Before driving her to the high desert, I had to take Ajay to the vendor El Parasol to buy burritos, tacos, enchiladas, whatnot. For she intended to spend as much time as possible in the canyon, in fact stay all winter without having the comfort of a car of her own; Felix and I were asked to give her rides into town whenever she had to stock up on new groceries. The winter of 2008 was a cold and snowy one, but this did not prevent Ajay from making long hikes. "I simply adore walking in nature. After about ten minutes my body just starts to hum and it's like I can hear all these happy chirps, dinks and chortles of my body setting into a groove. Once I am in this groovy state, I begin to be flooded with ideas." The ideas flow and all she has to do is go home and work with them until they fit together. This cannot happen in the city, where she wears earplugs most of the time to block out the torrent of sonic assaults. "I want to hear every little creak, furry footstep or leaf flutter reporting on the state of this very moment."

In the canyon, Ajay's long walks led to 'Winterlogue', a series of documents and little videos proving she was able to capture the many voices and moods of nature she encountered. She calls the website she created "something of a sketchbook, homage to the seasons that will eventually include the magic of spring, summer and fall." With this collection of walks Ajay wanted to remind herself that she herself is not frozen over and that nature is still as alive and delightful as ever.

Her sabbatical period eventually brought her to the conclusion she wanted to expand her science and ecological literacy. She chose to go to the United Kingdom to get her Ph.D. at Milton Keynes. In the end, it didn't work out because its academic environment in her opinion did not aim for the core, and she returned to the U.S. to search for better-suited possibilities. Nowadays she is back at her consultancy company "Politemachines" improving the flow of work between people and their machines, thus making work a little more enjoyable for many. Projects she has undertaken also include: learning how patients talk about the medical device implanted within their bodies (for Boston Scientific); bringing music lovers closer to the musicians, news and concert events they love (for MTV); helping physicians sort, save and stay on top of their enormous reading load (for NEJM); identifying which tools would enable travel agents to compete with self-serve websites (for Liberty Travel).

"Consumer confusion can be the death kiss of any design, whether for a physical or a virtual product. Testing concepts early in the design phase allows me to pinpoint which design elements might present problems that could ultimately result in product failure or rejection. To innovate is to ask new questions. I love nothing better than puzzles, mysteries, quandaries, muddles and barriers, all of which require that I rely on the Code of the Question: when in doubt, ask. I am all ears."

*Ton Haak, December 2012*