

Birthing A/New

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## Reflecting Mid-Process on a Performance Practice Through the Lens of Sustainability

By Rosemary Candelario and Bronwyn Preece

### The Premise

*Two performers. Two women. Two white dresses. Two streaks of white paint. Two cameras. Two portraits [of self] from Two countries, across One border, under One new moon.*

Commencing in June 2021, at the exact appointed time of the dark moon (be it in the wee hours of the morning, or mid-way through a class we are teaching), collaborators Bronwyn Preece (British Columbia, Canada) and Rosemary Candelario (Texas, United States) each take a black and white portrait selfie of themselves. They each wear an identical white dress and don a single white streak of butoh paint somewhere on their bodies.

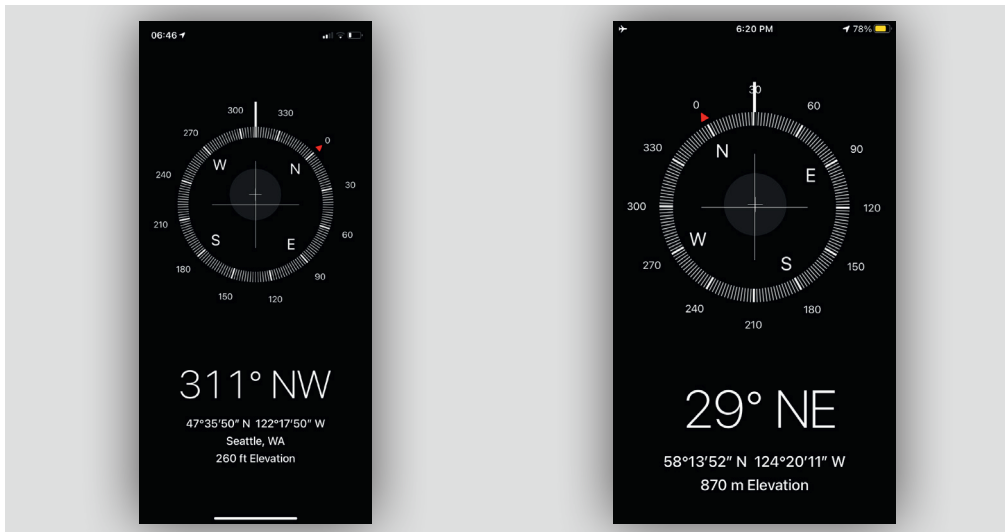
They are loosely holding and responding to the overarching question *'what am i birthing?'*

The two women then each screenshot the GPS compass coordinates of where they happen to be at that moment. They instantly email both the photo and coordinates to the other, who immediately creates a haiku in response, which they then send back.

This trans-national poetic-photographic exchange is a year-long, durational project -- (currently ongoing, June 2021-June 2022) -- *over fourteen moons* -- with the cumulative goal to create a multi-media performance space built from the images and words collected, within which the two will perform together, in person...

A simple frame.

And an evocative premise on which we reflect in these Artist Pages -- *mid-project* -- through the lens of sustainability and performance...





what am I birthing?  
lungs, wide as wingspan's rhythm  
breathing morning's flight

what am I birthing?  
Light in the darkness. Take flight  
into the shadows

Most days I am wild  
More than human, so much more  
Seeing with my snout

Tattoo me water  
I breathe grass touch stone bend wind  
Mirror my heartbeat



**How does reflecting on sustainable performance practices in the middle of the process impact the direction of the project?**

*Rosemary:*

To sustain means to keep alive, or to enable something to continue over a period of time. Sustainable has more specifically come to mean a practice, or product, that causes little or no damage to the environment, and thus that contributes to the continuation of the earth.

Originally we had planned to work together in person in fall 2020 on an undetermined project. I was going to be on sabbatical, and had a conference to attend that would bring me to Vancouver, not far from where Bronwyn lives. This nascent project was cancelled due to the global pandemic before we even had a chance to flesh out our ideas. One year into covid, however, we were still feeling drawn to working together. How could we do that when the US-Canada border was closed except to Canadian citizens, and non-essential travel was ill-advised? A durational performance practice that we could each conduct from our home bases, or wherever we happened to be, seemed the perfect solution. We could be alongside and synchronous, yet distanced. One photograph and one haiku. An effort that could be easily sustained over fourteen moon cycles.

Though we did not explicitly use the word “sustainable” while conceiving this project, in reflecting upon it mid-way through, it certainly feels like we’ve developed a strong artistic process and connection with a relatively low carbon footprint. Many professional organizations have begun to seriously weigh the advantages of face-to-face contact with the environmental costs of air travel when it comes to conferences. On one level, our project could be seen in a similar vein. But is the project’s virtual nature and low carbon footprint enough to make it “sustainable”? As we move towards wrapping up the photograph/haiku cycle, and towards the exhibition/performance stage, how can notions of sustainability be engaged in meaningful ways? How can the dreaming be sustained? How can we provide a space for witnesses to enter and participate in this resistive, creative dreaming? When thinking of sustainability, can we also consider that related term, sustenance? What can feed us as artists in this process, and by extension, what of this project can we feed others as sustenance?



**How does reflecting on sustainable performance practices in the middle of the process impact the direction of the project?**

*Bronwyn:*

at the outset, when conceiving this project, the term 'sustainability' was never used. this did not mean it was exempt from its tenets, rather that they were (arguably) implicit from the get-go. and yet, this project has been premised on the idea that it would culminate with the hopeful coming together in person to perform at the end of the year's cycle of moons (*\*at the time of conception, the international border between the two performers was still closed, with no stated plans for it to reopen, due to Covid*). it was at the point of seeing the *peripeti* call for contributions that we directly asked ourselves whether we felt the project was categorizable as 'sustainable'...

preece and candelario live 3700 km apart. in order to realize the vision of the project, multi-day vehicle or airplane travel would be required. at the beginning of the project, options were discussed – would we aim to perform at a place midway between our locations? or each travel to the other's location to perform, staging performances in both countries? we were leaning towards the latter, if the chance should arrive to realize it. does this then make the project unsustainable? i would argue no. not wholly. certainly it challenges the more limited ecological footprint of the building block months of internet-based photo-and-poem exchange...

and yes, it opens itself up for fair questioning...as certainly, a final, cumulative 'event' could be staged (or created for) online entirely.

however, i argue that the multi-faceted realization of connection – the power of in-person contact – in a world emerging from lockdown and shutdown post-pandemic, verbs a need to emphasize interconnectedness anew – and this project stresses, albeit subtly, this aspect of sustainability.

it has been a welcome, and somewhat uncomfortable opportunity to question the project: to ask myself whether i am wedded to the idea of us coming together in person to perform now that the border has reopened? in the end, i reasoned yes. as an artist whose works revolves around working with others, these past two years have been unreconcilably hard on my personal and artistic life. i have become a shadow of my former self. for me, there is something very poignant – very hopeful – amidst a climate where i was beginning to lose hope – that the culmination of this project – *that this coming together* – may allow me to step out from the image of 'selfie' and 'self-alone', to emerge from the 'black-and-white' and to re-connect away from screen...

to me this hope, births anew: sustainability...



## What are we birthing?

*Rosemary:*

The New Moon is the darkest time of the cycle. A time to go inwards and rest. A time to go deep into our darkness and see the embryos of what we are not yet consciously aware. In this sense what we are each birthing—one of us a mother, one of us not—is deeply personal, deeply individual. At the same time, this project also reveals what seeds we might share in common. Thus, we welcome synchronicities, resonances, and repetitions that offer clues to what is growing deep inside of us, and for which we are making preparations.

We did not take as a foundational premise of our project that the photographs be in/with nature. Nonetheless most, but not all, have been taken outdoors. I see in our photographs to date images that fragment our human selves and bring us into relationship with our surroundings, both “natural” and human-made. The white makeup, borrowed from our respective butoh-based practices, is sometimes a pathway, other times a gash in reality. It concentrates the viewer’s focus, and provides an opening into something not previously perceivable. This to me is a quality of butoh, and what I call “butoh ecologies”: to transform, to merge, to initiate becomings, all in relationship with the more-than-human world.

Our haikus, written upon first seeing each other’s image, are guided by instinct and intuition. They are guides to the wisdom of the waking dreams captured in the photographs. This kind of dreaming and dancing-with the more-than-human is crucial to transforming human behavior from living in/on/off the world to living-with it.



11:43 pm

new moon

### What are we birthing?

*Bronwyn:*

a creative incubator, where distance shrinks into something intimate and special.

for that period of time between clicking the shutter and sending the snap...to the anticipatory few moments between receiving the incoming photo from the other, mere minutes later – to then sitting and responding by way of haiku – *instantly. gut instinct leading language. syllable checker verifying metre.* – and then sending it back, to then receive anew a poem, an ekphrastic response to one's own portrait.... *this* whole period holds time in an altered, suspended space – for *this*, i mark my calendar.

*what are we birthing?* a pregnant space full of momentary possibility and anticipation – a zygote of fertile exchange – ethereal, moving, concretely liminal – wholly staged and storied – *potentially vulnerable* – born out of a simple premise... *ripe, rich, fresh, full and fleeting creative moments* – timed with orbital exactitude, anchored by the knowing that the pattern will be repeated anew, in another 28 days. in this, i take comfort.

improvisor stephen nachmanovitch declares that “structure ignites spontaneity. limits yield intensity” (1990, 84). this project exemplifies this statement, with its intensity deepening in subtle layers, problematizing the strata of play between nuance and boldness, honesty and complexity...pushing and challenging the staging of art/life.



**Is sustainability a delusion of hope or the ultimate form of resistance?  
and how does this project contribute to the answering...**

*Bronwyn:*

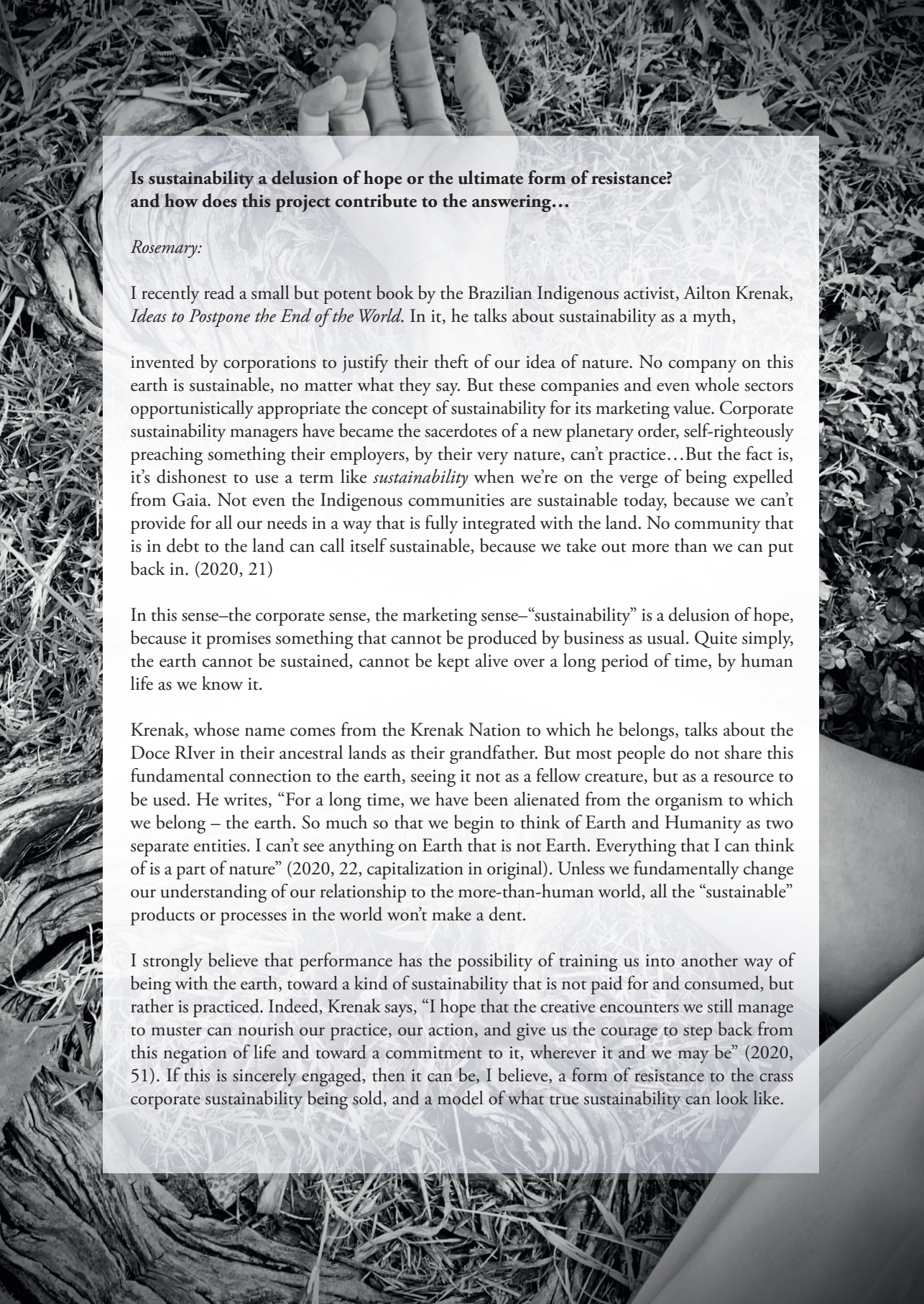
i would argue that 'sustainability' has been so overused – both lauded and applauded, commercialized and greenwashed – that its very essence has been denuded to the status of the near-vacuous. perhaps we are evolving, and the needs and demands of the planet increasing, at a far more exponential rate than the term 'sustainability' can keep up with. perhaps sustainability has been trumped by the plurality of crises.

i feel estranged from the term (and its division into pillars), but not from the interrelated principles at its very core. the concepts which underscore a 'sustainable' approach have always formed the backbone/container from which i have tried to navigate my best through life/work/art. at times i have done better than others. sometimes, i felt i have outright failed, but then have turned around and learned from what i deemed were mistakes or missteps. i am guided by my attempt to create and engage 'small acts of reconciliatory repair', amongst a landscape of evolving ethical concerns. i ask questions of myself, my art, my choices on the daily. the answering is rarely straightforward, marred by our enmeshment within large structures of power and influence.

*so does the materialization of this project help resist the possibility of deluding hope?*

for me, yes. it gives me something to look forward to, something unexpected, it's a gift, a ray of inspiration amidst a cultural climate which dwells fervently on fear and division. this project underscores and embodies connection – across distance, time zones, a border, and a pandemic. that, to me, becomes an act of creative resistance – to me, an act of sustainability→positive possibilities...





**Is sustainability a delusion of hope or the ultimate form of resistance?  
and how does this project contribute to the answering...**

*Rosemary:*

I recently read a small but potent book by the Brazilian Indigenous activist, Ailton Krenak, *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World*. In it, he talks about sustainability as a myth,

invented by corporations to justify their theft of our idea of nature. No company on this earth is sustainable, no matter what they say. But these companies and even whole sectors opportunistically appropriate the concept of sustainability for its marketing value. Corporate sustainability managers have become the sacerdotess of a new planetary order, self-righteously preaching something their employers, by their very nature, can't practice... But the fact is, it's dishonest to use a term like *sustainability* when we're on the verge of being expelled from Gaia. Not even the Indigenous communities are sustainable today, because we can't provide for all our needs in a way that is fully integrated with the land. No community that is in debt to the land can call itself sustainable, because we take out more than we can put back in. (2020, 21)

In this sense—the corporate sense, the marketing sense—“sustainability” is a delusion of hope, because it promises something that cannot be produced by business as usual. Quite simply, the earth cannot be sustained, cannot be kept alive over a long period of time, by human life as we know it.

Krenak, whose name comes from the Krenak Nation to which he belongs, talks about the Doce River in their ancestral lands as their grandfather. But most people do not share this fundamental connection to the earth, seeing it not as a fellow creature, but as a resource to be used. He writes, “For a long time, we have been alienated from the organism to which we belong – the earth. So much so that we begin to think of Earth and Humanity as two separate entities. I can't see anything on Earth that is not Earth. Everything that I can think of is a part of nature” (2020, 22, capitalization in original). Unless we fundamentally change our understanding of our relationship to the more-than-human world, all the “sustainable” products or processes in the world won't make a dent.

I strongly believe that performance has the possibility of training us into another way of being with the earth, toward a kind of sustainability that is not paid for and consumed, but rather is practiced. Indeed, Krenak says, “I hope that the creative encounters we still manage to muster can nourish our practice, our action, and give us the courage to step back from this negation of life and toward a commitment to it, wherever it and we may be” (2020, 51). If this is sincerely engaged, then it can be, I believe, a form of resistance to the crass corporate sustainability being sold, and a model of what true sustainability can look like.

**New Moon Schedule**

DATE	WHISLTER TIME	DENTON TIME
<b>2021*</b>		
June 10	3:53 am	5:53 am
July 9	6:16 pm	8:16 pm
August 8	6:50 am	8:50 am
Sept. 7	5:52 pm	7:52 pm
October 6	4:05 am	6:05 am
November 4	2:25 pm	4:15 pm
December 4	12:43 am	2:43 am
<b>2022 **</b>		
January 2	10:35 am	12:35 am
January 31	9:49 pm	11:49 pm
March 2	9:38 am	11:38 am
March 31	11:27 pm	1:27 am
April 30	1:30 pm	3:30 pm
May 30	4:32 am	6:32 am
June 28	7:53 pm	9:53 pm

\*(source: <https://www.space.com/18880-moon-phases.html>)  
 \*\*(source: [https://www.calendar-12.com/moon\\_phases/2022](https://www.calendar-12.com/moon_phases/2022))

3°13'52" N 124°20'11" W

870 m Elevation

260 ft Elevation



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**Bronwyn Preece** is an independent artist-scholar who is honoured to live on the unceded, Traditional Territories of the Lil'wat and Squamish Peoples in British Columbia, Canada. She is a site-sensitive poetic pirate, improvisational performance eARThist, author and avid hiker. She holds a SSHRC-funded PhD in Performance, a SSHRC-funded MA and BFA-with-Distinction in Applied Theatre. She has facilitated workshops and performed internationally. Her chapter 'Environments, Ecologies and Climates of Crises: Engaging DisAbilityArts and Cultures as Creative Wilderness' appears in the *Routledge Handbook of Disability Arts, Culture, and Media Studies* (2019); her poetry appears in she the *Routledge Companion to Butoh Performance* (2018); she has guest-edited a 'dis/sustain/ability' journal issue for the *Center for Sustainable Practice in the Arts* and authored numerous journal articles. She has the word 'gratitude' tattooed on her arm.

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**Rosemary Candelario** (Associate Professor of Dance, Texas Woman's University) writes about and makes dances engaged with butoh, ecology, and site-specific performance. Recent premieres include *aqueous* (2019, Kyoto Butoh Festival, Kyoto, Japan) and *100 Ways to Kiss the Trees* (2018, Denton, Texas). She is the recipient of the Oscar G. Brockett Book Prize for Dance Research for her book *Flowers Cracking Concrete: Eiko & Koma's Asian/American Choreographies* (Wesleyan University Press 2016). Rosemary is also the co-editor with Bruce Baird of the *Routledge Companion to Butoh Performance* (2018) and the author of numerous journal articles. [www.rosemarycandelario.net](http://www.rosemarycandelario.net)

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## Works Cited

- Krenak, Ailton. 2020. *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World*, trans. Anthony Doyle. Toronto: House of Anansi Press.
- Nachmanovitch, Stephen. 1990. *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*. New York: Tarcher/Putnam.