

In the House of Humanity Catastrophe and Ecstasy Hold Hands

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Abstract

Humanity may be thought of as a vernacular house of handmade rooms, some shackled, some finely crafted, some patched and repurposed and some clean and empty, waiting. Some spaces have high ceilings filled with music that echoes off stone walls or wooden planks; some are warm with familiar smells of bread baking, while others are underground, cold or hot and dirty.

How can I feel love inside myself with all the chaos swirling around outside the body? Can I feel what I give and keep giving without measure? If catastrophe is everywhere, in all time what can art do to bring communities together?

Love is an action, never simply a feeling.

bell hooks^[1]

As we are drenched in images of death and war today, how can our hearts crack open to become “proper” witnesses?

The sheer scale of today’s shadow is larger than we could ever have imagined. The days may be darker than the nights. What was up is now down. Where is the mirage of civil society? What is required of humanity to learn to love itself? How can we stave off the avalanche of hate and intolerance for the other? Perhaps we cannot refer to the whole of humanity, but merely the practice of individuals that perhaps someday may add up to something larger. Of course, engaging communities, neighbors, families, the mob, and generations to come is required, even if the future is uncertain. Who does this work? Building a body of reflection is no easy feat, but the urgency leads us to doing it anyway. The stakes exceed any notion of practicality.

Despite technological advances, countries are building higher walls and are inventing new ways to create stronger borders, more physical separation, and more institutional alienation. While some may fear the robots and others insist upon them, we can rely on anxiety and hope to continue to sort good from evil. Countries are feeding the quest to fend off a scale of migration that none of us have ever known. Border

walls are always initiated as temporary but in many cases they remain aggressive architectural gestures. If only a wall could be high enough to keep the status quo, it may be useful for some. The delineation of boundaries between nations is a lightning rod for social organization. Such organization has winners and losers, who are measured against economic levers. Access, equity, and reparations for misdeeds in the past remain elusive.

Some of us can walk outside and listen to birds, swim in the sea, perhaps eat out in cafés and restaurants, attend concerts, dances, and art exhibitions. Some of us read novels or poetry. We also endure illness, violence, poverty, and a life outside of infrastructures. Some of us work multiple jobs, others live without healthcare, dentistry, housing, and families. Some of us sing songs about the things we wish we had or that should go away. Mitigation of disaster and tragedy has potent cultural effects, understood by some and confused by others.

As we are steeped in forms of love we recognize, or even a love that surprises us, we are also in great despair. We wouldn't know this love without that despair. For that alone, our ability to witness must be generated, nurtured, and saturated. The architecture of empathy begins at the excavation and the foundation of a great house. The house is the collective, as opposed to suburban isolation. The house as we see it is concretized by land and reminds us how much a piece of land could mean. It seems most wars are centered on land or sea disputes. When land is compromised, destroyed, or razed, it is done so either through catastrophic environmental phenomena, slow incremental transformation, or, in the case of war-makers, extremely sudden.

Nomadic life shifts across areas of land, where land ownership is elusive for most, but identities remain, as populations struggle to keep alive their idioms, their cultural attributes, their celebrations of births, comings of age, marriages, and deaths.

Catastrophe is the great mirror that reflects upon all things inequitable. Loving humanity in its purest sense is by nature unconditional. Unconditional love is both a joyful and visceral feeling of care for another human being. It isn't butterfly kisses, a steamy night of passion or the joy a son brings to his mother's heart. It is unmoored, sometimes difficult, but buoyantly infinite nonetheless. It is profound, and humbling. An artist is particularly receptive to such form of empathy. But is it possible? Science says it is. Mario Beauregard, a professor at Montreal University's Centre for Research into Neurophysiology and Cognition, found that not only do all humans have the capacity to show unconditional love. More importantly, his research showed that specific areas of the brain are activated during this process, releasing dopamine the chemical involved in sensing pleasure. Loving unconditionally is a mutually beneficial endeavor.^[2]

As I move through the house of humanity, I watch my feet intently, which perhaps can be linked to age. I find one foot set in tragedy and one in ecstasy, disassociated from the end of the narrative, and unmoored by circumstances. How can I feel love inside myself despite the chaos swirling around me? How many times do we find ourselves avoiding suffering?

Perhaps this is the task of the artist; to dig into the darkness to find something else. When bridges are hard to identify, the artist may be able to step in. They can find the cracks and fill them with a breath. It is the artist who rises from the sea foam and hovers above it to become a goddess.

Every line we succeed in publishing today no matter how uncertain the future to which we entrust it is a victory wrenched from the powers of darkness.

Walter Benjamin^[3]

In 2009, a photograph appeared on social media platforms and international news channels that depicted the then president of the Maldives island nation signing documents under water. Mohammed Nasheed had staged this very carefully, placing desks and metal name places on the seabed floor and inviting his cabinet to join him in diving suits. He and other government officials signed documents asking other countries to cut carbon emissions. "What we are trying to make people realize is that the Maldives is a frontline state. This is not merely an issue for the Maldives but for the world," Nasheed argued.

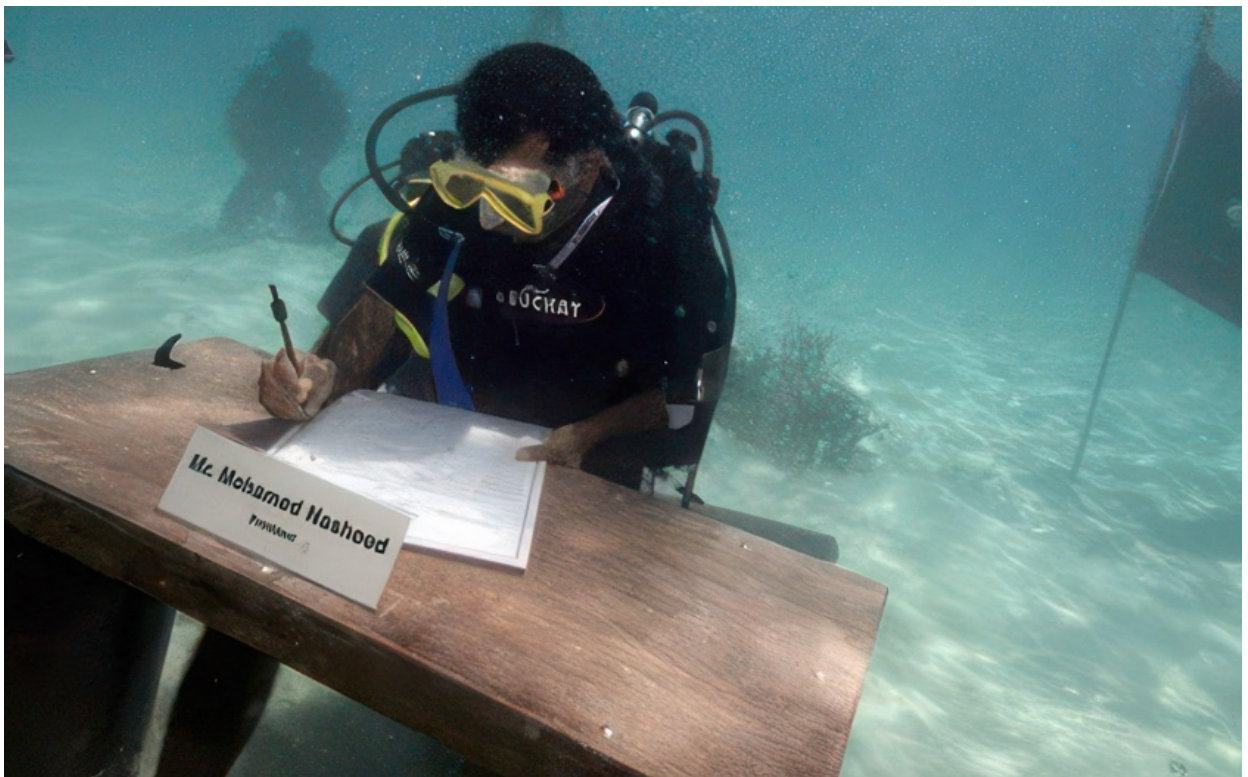


Figure 1. Mohammed Nasheed, President of the Maldives, signing documents under water to raise global awareness of rising sea levels, 2009

As with most tipping points, one can only determine with hindsight that this was in fact a catalyst for change. This photograph became a marker in time for me to turn my practice inside out and foster a new way of being in the world.

The following descriptions exemplify action, aesthetics, social engagement, and a love of humanity that demonstrate this way.

Alberto Mellado Moreno, Sonoran Coast, Mexico

Social art practices foreground being embedded deeply into communities, engaging publics, and in some ways are co-created, or co-led by their participants. Of course, Indigenous artists, writers, elders have

been doing this kind of work for centuries, and one such writer, who is also a sea conservationist and tribal leader on the Sonoran coast of Mexico, is Alberto Mellado Moreno.

Moreno's activities have been internationally recognized by Ocean Revolution, which supported his work for ten years, along that of other Indigenous ocean stewards around the world. The Comcaac tribe had maintained their community for three millennia; after having been a nomadic people they settled on the largest island landmass and parts of the mainland of Mexico. The Sonoran coast of Mexico is a desert region, and the Comcaac have been fiercely independent with their own distinct language. Moreno was one of a few Comcaac young people who left the area to go to college and then came back to serve his tribe, its fishery practice, and the greater territory of which he is an elected leader. As part of his work, he wrote three volumes on the history of the Comcaac, carefully sorting the remaining image and text fragments held by museums in both Mexico and the Smithsonian in the United States. After seeing one particular picture, a drawn image of a tribal fisherman, he wrote a fourth book that became a historical novel titled, *El Pópulo de Adam Gelig*. Gelig was a Jesuit priest who came into the territory for evangelical reasons.

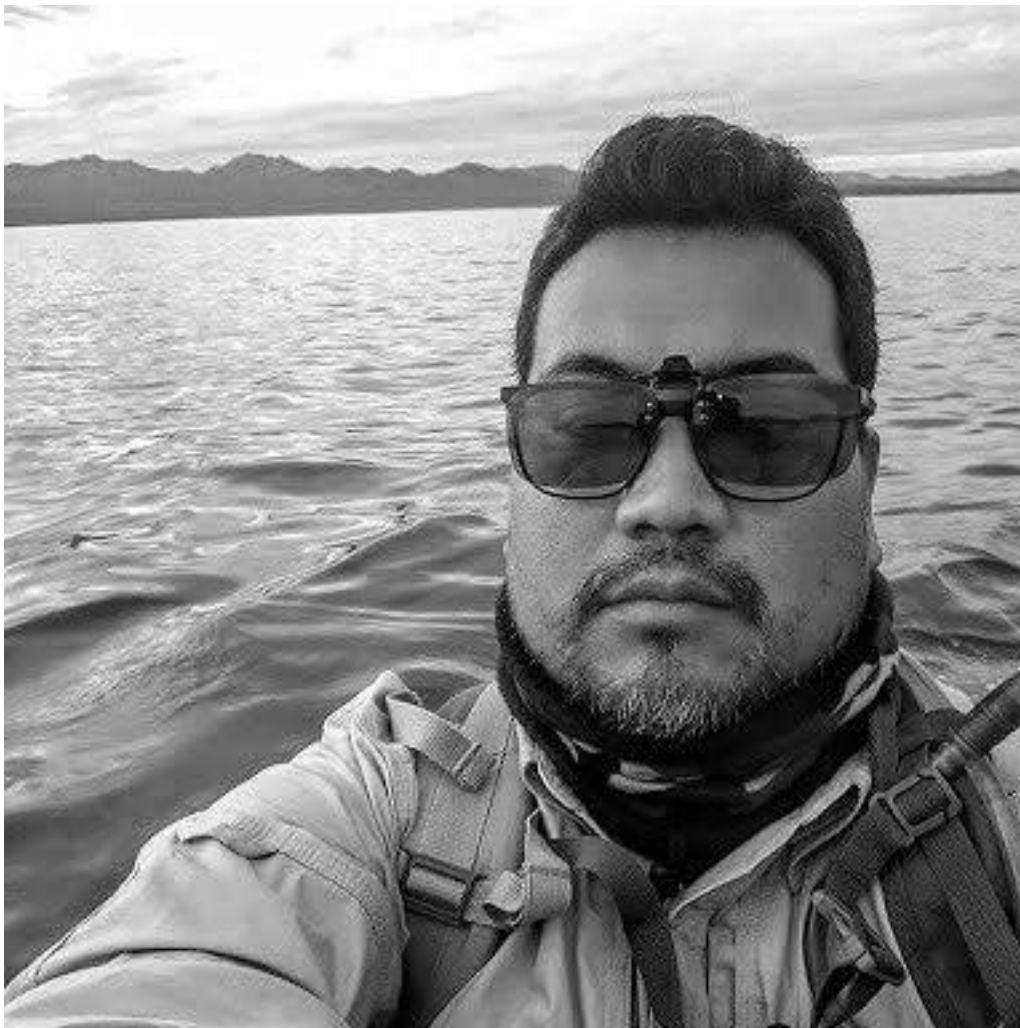


Figure 2. Portrait of Alberto Mellado Moreno

Moreno deftly interweaves his politics, aesthetics, cultural rituals, and writing to gain global recognition for the Comcaac nation, including from the president of Mexico, López Obrador, who has visited the tribe's area. Moreno has encouraged both tradition and innovation, with women as the leaders in the

conservation of the island. Moreno is extraordinarily committed to sustaining tribal traditions, elevating educational system, developing fishery practices, and addressing the challenge to access drinking water and sea level rise. The Comcaac reintroduced mollusks, which had been over-fished for a millennium, into their ocean territory. Moreno once mentioned to me that he had to patrol fishing areas in a canoe with a shotgun to fend off wayward narco traffickers in homemade submarines because they would crash into the mollusk beds and kill thousands of organisms. In recent years, building new housing the Mexican government moved 90 of the tribe's families back from the waterline.



Figure 3. Basketball court with black square and radiating concentric marking in star form

This image of the transformation of a high-school basketball court with tribal designs show a monumental artwork. It was painted and designed by tribe members to inspire young people to understand their histories. The geometry of the line work that is evident in basket designs was translated to the ground. The boundaries of the game area are consistent with other basketball courts, but the bones of the design are formed by intricate line work filled in with saturated orange earth tones, turquoise, black, and white. As part of a revisiting of the past, the young people of the tribe have recently begun to mark their faces again, based on the drawings and photographs of their ancestors. With its monumental execution and design, the basketball court updates these marks. With the concentric marking of the star form, the center of the court radiates around the black square. At once the viewer is keenly aware of the intersecting of tradition and the contemporary gesture of this large-scale painting. The fact that it is on the ground acknowledges the primal relationship to the land. We see the images of Moreno in his territory, covers of books with his recent writing, and the president of Mexico with tribe members, and the basketball court.

Sita Bhaumik, Oakland, California

The Black Panther party was founded in 1966 by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton. Like all enduring revolutionary organizations, the Panthers' histories of violence have been coupled with all the consciousness-raising and critical analysis that they offered the world. They became deeply influential to

many people in the United States and other countries around the globe, such as China, Vietnam, Cuba, the United Kingdom, Ghana, Algeria, and South Africa. Their history, controversies, and achievements are well-documented in books, films, and the media. Agnes Varda's *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution* (1968), Stanley Nelson's *The Black Panther: Vanguard of the Revolution* (2015), and the action movie *Black Panther* (2018) were all inspired by the movement, and are only three examples of at least eight films, in addition to numerous articles about the women in the Black Panther party who addressed issues of sexism within it. The University of Auckland, New Zealand, has courses and symposia on the Panthers, the Freedom Archives in Berkeley has 12,000 hours of archival audio and video material, as do the National Archives, the Oakland history room library, and Pacific Radio Archives, among others. This doesn't account for the hundreds of graduate theses that have been written on the Black Panthers.

Artist Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik has always operated outside of traditional arts structures by engaging with mainstream communities in Oakland. As a sensory-based artist, she works with scent, sculpture, photography, and text in exhibitions with conceptual titles such as "To Curry Favor, Home and Away, Mamasita's Tiny Tea House, Dear Indian Grocer Under the Freeway." As she describes it, her work "focuses on decolonization [...] and the hierarchy of senses."^[4] I remember one particular work that consist of a series of scents in bottles with titles such as *Unemployment*. One opens the jar and sniffs a whiff of what she imagines unemployment smells like. She was led to food, poverty, and changing West Oakland's food desert and formed The People's Kitchen Collective, creating a monumental scale neighborly event before the Covid pandemic, serving meals to 500 people. In 2023 she recreated the Free Breakfast program in West Oakland's Lil Bobby Hutton/Defremery Park for the public.

Having a special place in the hearts and minds of generations in California, Sita Bhaumik honors the Panther's Oakland beginnings and their efforts in the Free Breakfast program organized by The People's Kitchen Collective, representing their Ten Point Program:

What We Want

1.

We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black community.

2.

We want full employment for our people.

3.

We want an end to the robbery by the White man of our Black community.

4.

We want decent housing, fit for shelter [of] human beings.

5.

We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.

6.

We want all Black men to be exempt from military service.

7.

We want an immediate end to police brutality and murder of Black people.

8.

We want freedom for all Black men held in federal, state, county, and city prisons and jails.

9.

We want all Black people when brought to trial to be tried in court by a jury of their peer group or people from their Black communities. As defined by the constitution of the United States.

10.

We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.



Figure 4. The People's Kitchen Collective

Ron Rael

Ron Rael is from Conejos County, Colorado. He traverses the territories of art, design, activism, and social practices. He cares about histories that have been marginalized, forgotten, and ignored. As a Latinx practitioner he has been keenly sensitive to the plight of migrants, creating awareness of those who cross the border between the United States and Mexico. Rael uses 3D printing machines assembled in the desert, and the clay soil of the area to create unique “hornos,” places to make fire and cook or sleep. He fires them from the inside, out of sight. These structures are elegant, with tessellating forms that create human-scale shelters that are practical for those traveling by foot.

This work is particularly important when we realize the sheer scale of the great migration due to increasing farming and water challenges, including the loss of landmass through sea-level rise. In 2017, Rael published his book, *Border Wall as Architecture: A Manifesto for the US Mexico Boundary*. As the Chair of Art Practice and Professor of Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, Rael's work has been recognized by museums in the US and internationally.

In 2019, Rael specifically took on the border wall between Mexico and the US. His *Teeter-Totter Wall* installation consists of inserting bright pink planks so they could become seesaws for kids on either side. As they leaped on to the planks, one could hear the laughter of kids at play on both sides. The work required no explanation as it was inherently understood by everyone what the pink planks protruding on either side of the wall were for. To realize the work, Rael had to act fast with a team, first identifying a site that might not be immediately intervened with by border patrol agents. He worked with a collective, called Colectivo Chopeke, from Juarez Mexico, to accomplish this caper. Rael was awarded the Beazley

Design of the Year for this work by the London Design Museum. The US government continues to bungle its relationships with migrants who take unimaginable risks to arrive at the border. Art in this case became exactly the opposite, creating a real experience where hierarchies evaporated into joy.



Figure 5. Children at the US/Mexican border playing on either side of Ron Rael's Teeter-Totter Wall, 2019

Following the project, Rael invested more deeply into the no man's land when he, along with others including students, erected the large-scale 3D printing machine. It was of course practical to turn the local soil into building material on site. Through time-lapse photography we can see Rael's shelters emerge, ending with the burning of the horno structure from the inside. The process creates a surface bond that can withstand the elements for a long while, thus creating an insulated shelter for those needing to eat and sleep along the way. The structures are like traditional clay ovens, where migrants can come together to share a meal. Titled *Pedacito de la Tierra (A Little Piece of Home)*, they create a sense of community and refuge south of the Mexican border.



Figure 6. The construction of 3D-printed “horno” shelter structures south of the Mexico/US border



Figure 7. The construction of 3D-printed "horno" shelter structures south of the Mexico/US border

Kunele Adeyemi

Kunlé Adeyemi is a Nigerian architect, urbanist, and creative researcher. Adeyemi founded his firm NLÉ, an architecture, design and urbanism practice, based in Amsterdam, in 2010, after having worked with Rem Koolhaas for nine years. Having prototyped the Makoko Floating System in the lagoon of Lagos and the Chikako radio station, NLÉ has grown in international stature. Both projects took on the economic challenges of the poor and acknowledged life in the watery world of Lagos. This particular approach has gone on to be developed in China and four other countries on different continents. Adeyemi's work introduces the idea that adaptation can be articulated with a refined design and function, elevating the experience for people without means. NLÉ has also taken on innovative and more well-endowed projects, and like all savvy creatives, Adeyemi leverages these to fund projects in more deprived scenarios. In 2016 NLÉ was awarded the Silver Lion Prize for its second version of Makoko Floating School (MFS II Waterfront Atlas) at the 15th International Architecture Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia. Other NLÉ projects include A Prelude to The Shed in New York, United States, the Black Rhino Academy in Karatu, Tanzania, and the Serpentine Summer House at the Royal Kensington Gardens in London in

2016.

Kunele refers to “African Water Cities, which explore the intersections of rapid urban life and the coming of climate change.” Most recently, he has led a team of researchers at Princeton University that has focused on architecture and urban solutions that are geared towards societal and environmental needs. He wants to find processes to bridge gaps for the coming global crises of migration and access to water.

I watched Kunele describe his work during a lecture in San Francisco, and I felt immediately that we were on the same page. He understands what he must do in order to impact communities that would otherwise be left behind. Having grown up in Nigeria, he has a deep commitment and allegiance towards making an impact on the African continent. His firm has an international sphere of influence and offers hope because of its access to those with enough resources to make a difference. As the world inches closer to the moment when adaptation is the only choice, Adeyemi will be a thought leader for the most impacted populations. Adeyemi also understands the role of culture and its efficacy in holding a community together and is especially interested in radio stations because of their accessibility to young people as exemplified in his Chicako radio station.



Figure 8. The Chikako radio station (2016) rises and falls with the tide while still inked to the land, offering audio-engineer training and capturing the imagination of the next generation

Kim Anno

Seeing the photograph of Mohammed Nasheed in the Maldives signing documents under water in 2009 (Fig. 1) changed my life and art practice forever. To me it was a shocking image of a duly elected government, with bureaucracy redefined by situating its representatives under water with humor, yes, but also with horror. Nasheed was influential to environmental justice advocates, those who would begin

to identify island nations as the first responders to the great redistribution of the sea.

I came to realize that creating another decade of entirely abstract work was not going to be my path forward; though aesthetically joyful, I sought a new approach to being creative and I decided that I had to at last merge my social activism with the projects that I was producing. Two aspects influenced how I work now; one was reconsidering access to younger generations, which had to come through using film or video because of their flexibility and popularity with younger people, and the other was the need for ease of distribution among communities, outside of elite institutions such as galleries and museums. Leveraging my own art world access would appear later, but perhaps this is a common occurrence for creatives; one begins to understand one's position, its privileges, and its responsibilities, over time.

After a period of creating water puppet shows influenced by shows of the Vietnamese Ramayana and large-scale photographs and videos to highlight the urgency of climate change, in 2011 I began a series of films titled, *Men and Women in Water Cities*. I came to filmmaking by way of cinematography and realized slowly the importance of storytelling. At first, puppets were the characters in the videos that were combined with music. Studying Ester Williams' underwater productions, I accepted as few boundaries as possible for *Men and Women in Water Cities, Chapter One*. I gathered willing participants living in California, creating training-like videos to adapt to being underwater. The movement under water was akin to a dance. Two free divers held their breath for six minutes while they attempted to simulate making business deals. Three people played a game of basketball, with a ball I filled with water so that it was too heavy to bounce on the bottom of the swimming pool. The music is by Anne Seeman playing a slide guitar.

Videos can not be displayed in PDF documents. Follow the link to see the source.

[Link to source](#)

Figure 9. Kim Anno, *Men and Women in Water Cities, Chapter One*, 2011, video, duration 14 minutes

The second video I present here is *Praxis*, which further pushes the ideas of underwater training for living a different kind of life for those in coastal communities impacted by sea level rise. Nakadancer's Jose Navarette and Debby Kajiya are dressed in business attire and attempt to adapt their business to living under water while they push around floating homes made after visiting Fukushima's tsunami zone.

Videos can not be displayed in PDF documents. Follow the link to see the source.

[Link to source](#)

Figure 10. Kim Anno, *Praxis, 0132*, video, duration 2:58

Humanism is the only, and I would go so far as saying the final resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history.

Edward Said^[5]

In 2012, I came to South Africa to teach media skills to young people from Kwazulunatal at the Bartel Arts Trust in Durban. Each young person was a director for a day and made their own videos focused on issues they were concerned with, such as the Aids crisis, alcoholism, and domestic abuse. In exchange they agreed to be actors in another film I would direct, *Water City, Durban*. Durban has since experienced loss of land mass and rising water levels that have impacted their coastal infrastructure. The participants were dressed in white-collar-work outfits influenced by the 1980s paintings of Robert Longo's *Men in Cities* series. They appear at the beach to play a soccer match in the water wearing their office clothes. A small boy is the arbiter of justice and the game's referee, and the narrative ends with his clarion call, blowing a whistle that is robbed of its sound in the end. We made props of post nation-state flags to reference the failure of the US in helping the victims of hurricane Katrina.

Sport is a popular vehicle to convey some complex ideas because of the accessibility to the wider population across the world. It is the first thing I consider when commencing a new episode in the series because of its influence of joy.



Figure 11. *Water City, Durban, 2012*, video, duration 4:12 (still)

As the series has developed, the message from the next generation is clear, "We want hope," so hope becomes the driver of the projects and the key question is: How to adapt and give hope? *Water City, Berkeley* convened 100+ teenagers who played cheerleaders, referees, and players in a post-nation state capture-the-flag game half a mile out on Alameda beach. The viewer is asked to imagine the participants are walking on water, enabled by the shallow sea shelf. The teenagers play the game, the cheerleaders cheer, and there is an ancient Greek ceremonial pageant, and we see the players glide, dance, and capture the flag.



Figure 12. Kim Anno, capture the Flag, scene from Water City, Berkely, 2014, video, duration 21:51 (still)

In 2022, 114 Million people migrated due to forced displacement, lack of food, and violence. The case of the capsized rusty fishing trawler, the *Adriana*, particularly stuck with in my mind. Six hundred people drowned while Americans were worried about the billionaires aboard the submarine that exploded while looking for the *Titanic* on the bottom of the ocean.



Figure 14. Media image of the capsized fishing trawler Adriana, 2022

Two questions haunt me: the first is: Who takes the photograph and how do they reconcile doing so with their conscience? The second is: What can art do and what can it not do? Every artist, me included, is looking for tools. In response to the capsizing of the boat and more migrants dying off the coast of Lesbos, I thought immediately of Sappho. My former collaborator, Anne Carson, gave me the courage to appropriate anything from history, and to dismantle and re-use the canons, using the tools of the master to interrogate their house so to speak. Many of my projects have used Ancient texts, Greek plays, Dante, Proust, and recently Sappho's poetry. As Sappho was from Lesbos, the site of another great human catastrophe, I decided to borrow her work, add to it, and rearrange it to reflect on the larger implications of the disaster of climate change. The poem was the basis for the lyrics for the music scored by the composer Anne Hege, performed live in Oakland, in August 2023, that accompany a video.

Stand up and look at me, face to face

My friend,

Unloose the beauty of your eyes.

You Burn me

Love Shook my heart

Like the Wind on the mountain

Troubling the Oak Trees

Your breath was the sea

The sky over head,

And in me

In my veins the stars

My voice goes,

My tongue freezes.

Fire, delicate fire, in the flesh.

Blind, stunned, the sound of

Thunder, my ears.

Kim Anno, excerpt from "Signs"



Figure 15. Kim Anno, *Spectacle of Nature*, 2022, video, duration 8:00 (still)

In 2022, I made another video installation title, titled *Spectacle of Nature*, with an animation titled *Canto One*, using a secularized Dante, with animation by Charles Woodman. The actors read Dante's script, while we see the sculpture of the migrants' kayak, and an artist is forced to choose what to bring with them in their migration across the sea.



Figure 16. Kim Anno, design for Spectacle of Nature scenography, 2022

All things catastrophe are flagged by all things in the love of humanity. Eliot's phrase, reality cannot be deprived of the "other echoes [that] inhabit the garden." Art flings, flies, burns and dies in these echoes.



Figure 17. Kim Anno, 90 Miles from Paradise, 2022, detail installation

The work *90 Miles from Paradise* places actors from Miami with actors from Havana, Cuba who also recite the secular Dante in an effort to find common ground. Key West is paired with Havana because it is the low-lying island that will eventually have to be helped by Havana.



Figures 18–19. Kim Anno, *90 Miles from Paradise*, 2022 (stills)

Despite the obvious challenges of the reality of sea level rise there is celebration. The irony of course is

that the state of Florida has a climate-change denying government, hell-bent on sacrificing the poor the ravages of a changing landscape and infrastructure.

There are other episodes in the *Men and Women in Water* series, including one in Ipswich, England, and a new one, *Water Cities: Kalimantan*, which is about to go into production.

Water Cities, Kalimantan will be shot in Indonesia because of the relocation of the country's capital, Jakarta, the first mega city on the planet having to do so due to landmass and drinking water loss. Jakarta will move to East Kalimantan on the island of Borneo, where a new mega city will be born, named Nusantara. Borneo is a world heritage site for biodiversity, including animals such as Orangutans among other large mammals, and millions of birds and insects. The island is shared between three countries: Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia. The carbon-dominant West has little ground for critique as the Indonesians have to do something to save their own populations. Our aim here is to make a work that foregrounds the perception of the generation that will inherit this new city, Nusantara.

As artists, we make choices and these choices are the biggest gestures, the grandest aesthetics we can invent. How the audiences begin to act is another story.

Footnotes

1. hooks, bell. *All About Love: New Visions* 2018 William Morrow & Company [↑](#)
2. Beauregard, Mario. *Brain Wars: The Scientific Battle Over the Existence of the Mind and the Proof That Will Change the Way we Live Our Lives*: 2012 HarperOne [↑](#)
3. Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, 1986 Schocken Books Inc. [↑](#)
4. Kuratomi Bhaumik, S. "The Other Senses." *Art Practical, The Food Issue*, Nov. 18. 2010. [↑](#)
5. Said, Edward. *Orientalism* 1979 p.29 Vintage books [↑](#)