

On Community-Based Art and Catastrophe

Adriene Jenik, Li Sumpter, and Tal Beery
Introduction by Joshua Moses

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Presented by the John B. Hurford '60 Center for the Arts and Humanities, Leaves of Grass, and the House Fund for Visiting Artists and Critics at Haverford College, in partnership with Education Ecologies Collective.

2022

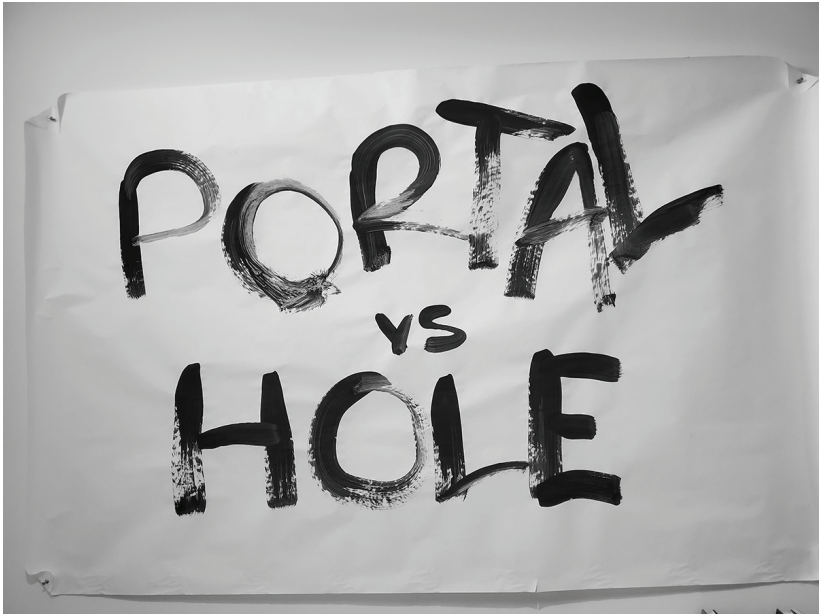


It's often difficult to think of what to say these days. To know what to think, where to turn to go, how to be a human. Torrents of violence, the COVID-19 pandemic, shootings, heat domes, and forest fires threaten our capacity to navigate, to experience oneself as part of anything one would want to be a part of. And yet one can't—tenably—be alone with all of this for very long. One can't persist, walk without others, and still have an imagination to see and live differently. Initially, *On Community-Based Art and Catastrophe* was a roundtable that took place on March 21, 2022 at Haverford College, bringing together three artists who I admire—Adriene Jenik, Tal Beery, and Li Sumpster—whose various engagements with community, art, and catastrophe offered me an alternative to despair. Not exactly hope but perhaps something even larger, older, and more mysterious. Each of the artists offered something very different: Adriene's conjuring of the *Artist's Grief Deck* provides a vision of collaboration that offers possibilities for moving through grief, together, with images and words of an extended community. Li's near-shamanic work on the arts of survival and sustainability through diverse ecologies has long offered a model of expansive and engaged creativity for me and

many others. Tal's haunting video installation on grief, loss, and bereavement during the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted me to rethink how we might construct public spaces of grief. It was a beautiful event, a rare gathering of gentle solidarity and vulnerability, made more memorable because for many of us it was the first gathering of this kind since the pandemic began. Their work wove/weaves together a kind of communal life, and the evening felt like such a gift that we wanted to create a more enduring artifact to share with others—in the hopes that they might find some sustenance for themselves during a time when arts and community, the arts of community, will, it seems, be ever more essential. We sincerely hope that this small book finds those who can benefit from the gifts that these three artists offer. I am grateful for their work and friendship.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was made possible with support from the John B. Hurford '60 Center for the Arts and Humanities, the Leaves of Grass Fund, and the House Fund for Visiting Artists and Critics. The roundtable was a collaboration between Education Ecologies Collective (edecologies.org/) and Haverford College. We would also like to thank James Weissinger, Kelly Jung, and Gus Stadler.



In March 2020, as I reconfigured my life in relation to the COVID-19 shutdown, I found myself spiraling downward.

A friend of mine shared a piece of wisdom:

“This moment humanity is going through can now be seen as a portal and as a hole. The decision to fall into the hole or go through the portal is up to you. [...]”

The text was attributed to an indigenous elder and was significantly longer than these short phrases. To me, at that time, it pointed to a choice I could make – would I see this threshold of time as a tragic force dooming me to desolation and inaction? Or could I imagine this time as a portal through which I could imagine new ways of being with and in the world and act accordingly.

I took down a large roll of paper and some india ink and scrawled the phrase out in large letters and hung it behind my main studio table. The original idea was to confront myself with it each day as I entered the studio. Soon, it became my ubiquitous zoom backdrop, inspiring hundreds of conversations about the importance of perspective during times of challenge.

I later learned the attribution of the post to an indigenous elder was likely apocryphal (see snopes.com for an explanation of its “unproven” designation). While I stopped assigning the attribution, I am still thankful for the phrase and the way it helped me shift my mindset.



A ritual to assist you with processing grief:

The 5 of Water card is pictured here. The water cards in the ECOtarot deck are related to emotions and the 5 cards are cards that relate to loss. This loss is something that must be passed through in order for something new to emerge.

Grief can be heavy and hard to express because of the extremes of emotions that arise. An exercise to help you express your emotions:

- Fill a large bowl with fresh water.
- Find a quiet place where you can sit where it is ok if water spills.
- Place the bowl on your lap or on a hard stable surface like a table or floor.
- Submerge your entire face (eyes, mouth, nose) in the water and scream, yell, curse, rail against your higher power – whatever you need to express.
- Come up for air as needed
- Refill bowl and repeat for as many times as you need.

For more ideas on how to live with and move through grief see “The Artists’ Grief Deck” / griefdeck.com

GoodBye, Earth

By Adriene Jenik (written at Grant St. Studios
3/17/18 after reading ECOtarot cards)

For piano

Verse

F Bb Dm x 3 / Bb F Bb F

Chorus

C Bb x 3 (lower octave)

Goodbye Earth
Goodbye Soil
Goodbye Planet
Goodbye, goodbye

Goodbye Ocean
Goodbye Sea
Goodbye Aquifer
Goodbye, goodbye

CHORUS

Hello Fire
Hello Fire
Hello Fire

Goodbye air
Goodbye fresh air
Goodbye deep breaths
Goodbye, goodbye

Goodbye friends
Goodbye lovers
Goodbye family
Goodbye, goodbye

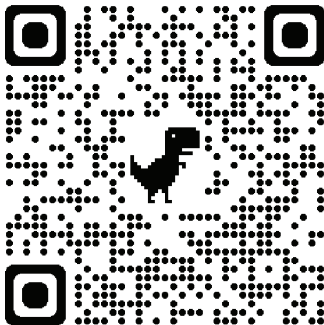
CHORUS

Goodbye trees
Goodbye garden
Goodbye flowers
Goodbye, goodbye

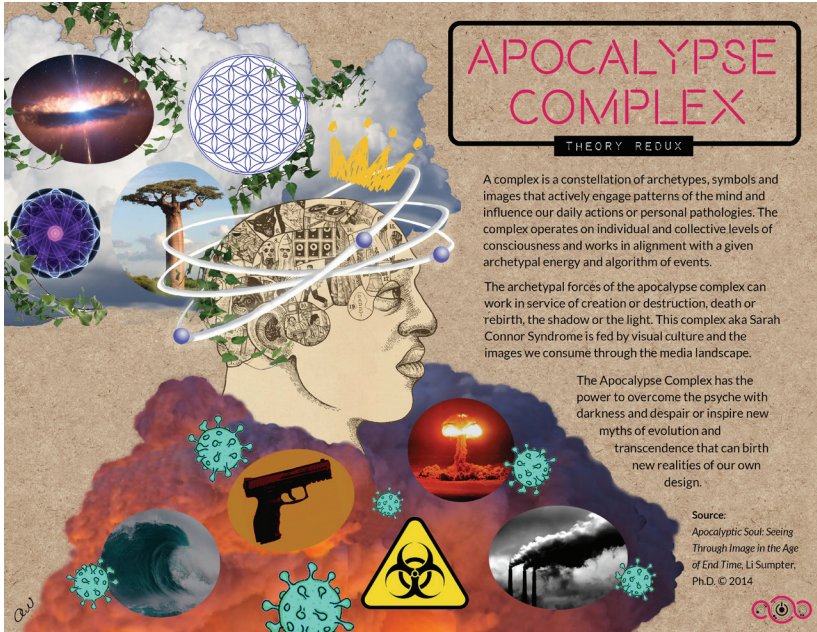
Goodbye cats
Goodbye dogs
Goodbye butterflies
Goodbye, goodbye

END:

Chorus Instrumental only (with feeling)



<https://soundcloud.com/ajenik/goodbye-earth>



Believe.

MYTHMEDIA STUDIOS PRESENTS:
AFROFUTURE FILMS AFTER DARK

ATTACK THE BLOCK!

Bartram's Garden • Philly • Planet Earth

Star Date 10.10.2019

6:30 - 11 PM EST



HAIKU

poem composition:

1st line = 5 syllables

2nd line = 7 syllables

3rd line = 5 syllables

All that lives must die. (5)

Time is a spiral in space. (7)

Endless is the soul. (5)

Love and Gravity (5)

Will pull you through the darkness, (7)

If you dare, believe. (5)

**SURVIVAL IS A RIGHT,
NOT A PRIVILEGE**

**OFF-WORLD EXODUS
FOR ALL HUMANS**

**VOTE for the INTERSTELLAR EQUITY
AND INCLUSION ACT.**

Powered by the COALITION to LIBERATE EARTHBOUND REFUGEES

TAKE ROOT AMONG THE STARS

SCANNERS DARKLY PRESENTS

HOME WORLD
OTHER WORLDS

mythmedia

10.20.21
BARTRAM'S GARDEN



Between March 5 and 12, 2021, artist Tal Beery interviewed eight people from the Baltimore area. Most of them were grieving recent Covid-19 deaths of loved ones, and all of them had to say goodbye or memorialize their loved ones under conditions of social distancing. They were diverse in age, gender, race, and religion. In total, more than 300 minutes of interviews were recorded.

These stories were used for in the absence of a proper mourning, an outdoor installation and online space. Audio excerpts from interviews played on loop from speakers hidden at the base of two large 15-foot decorative arches on the facade of the Jewish Museum of Maryland in the historic Jonestown in Baltimore City. The arches themselves framed large prints of Zoom background images gathered from the recorded interviews, turning the museum's facade into a pixelated portal to the homes of grieving neighbors.

The audio excerpts played with relatively low volume, so that one would have to approach it closely to understand what was being said. The images, on the other hand, could only be comprehended from a distance due to their scale and pixelation. So as one approached to listen, one could no longer make out the image, and vice versa. This challenge to comprehension, and the need to continually approach and retreat, was important to the experience of the work.

in the absence of proper mourning is a collaboration of LABA: A Laboratory for Jewish Culture and the Jewish Museum of Maryland, made possible with the generous support of CANVAS. The work is part of the national project – Dwelling in a Time of Plagues – which makes new art possible at outdoor sites.

Special Thanks:

*Sol Davis, Executive Director, Jewish Museum of Maryland
Ronit Muszkatblit, Senior Director of Arts + Culture + LABA:
A Laboratory for Jewish Culture, the 14th Street Y*



“Grief is best processed when it is acknowledged. Everyone has a story, and everyone deserves not only the chance—but also an earnest invitation—to share it. When we feel we have witnesses to our narratives, we often feel our emotional burdens are ever-so-slightly-lighter. Because they are divided up and carried by a community that cares and sees us...”

Rebecca Soffer, *The Importance of Witnesses in Times of Grief*

I've been in touch with a few people today who might participate in the project. One guy shared a video he made of his sister, who passed from covid in December. It is incredibly moving. I'm weeping -

8:01 PM

Fri, Mar 5

first interview in 2 minutes. i'm nervous!

8:58 AM

Deeeeeeep breaths. You've got this.

9:22 AM ✓✓

woah - that was intense

9:47 AM

i'll be needing more tissues

9:47 AM

i can't believe i signed up for this

9:48 AM

Talk to me

9:48 AM ✓✓

so grateful they're trusting me with these stories

9:48 AM

How'd it go?

9:48 AM ✓✓

it went very well

9:48 AM

In this one, the interviewee lost her mother to covid very recently, but her mother had had dementia for about 10 years prior so the grieving was happening throughout that whole time. The toughest thing for her was not being able to say goodbye.

9:49 AM

Think of when you were grieving. Draw a grief picture.



List the people in your community who are grieving right now. Have you reached out?

If you can not think of anyone off the top of your head, it may mean the people around you aren't comfortable talking about it.

How are your in-laws doing today?

1:35 PM ✓✓

They are doing better physically I guess. They're just feeling a bit depressed. I really hope there are no long term issues... worries me a lot.

8:48 PM

~~She's been~~ just put me in touch with our first potential participant! (should I be happy about that?)

8:48 PM

It took me about 45 minutes to write the email connecting with them and offering a time to meet.

8:48 PM

I was second guessing every word... I didn't want to come off too this or too that. I don't even know. I was concerned about writing too much - because long emails are always a drag - but there was so much I needed to say!

8:51 PM

Write the email you would send to a grieving friend or neighbor inviting them to talk to you about their experience. Don't make it too short or too long.



Joshua Moses is associate professor of anthropology and environmental studies at Haverford College. His book, *Anxious Experts: Disaster Response and Spiritual Care from 9/11 to the Climate Crisis*, was released in Spring 2022 (University of Pennsylvania Press). He has worked in Alaska and the Canadian Arctic on the politics of resource extraction, the climate crisis, and migration and homelessness. His community-based research in the Philadelphia area focuses on environmental education, the arts, and community gardening. His current work focuses on transforming organizations to address the climate crisis, which includes a forthcoming podcast series, *Swamped: What Experts Do When They No Longer Know What to Do*. Joshua has a daughter, plays the accordion, and spends as much time with trees and mountains as possible.



Adriene Jenik (she/they) is an artist, educator, and end of life doula who resides in the high desert of California. Her creative research encompasses diverse practices (performance, cinema, songwriting) from which she develops new forms of storytelling and ritual that support cultural change. Recent works include “data humanization” performances, public climate future readings with her ECOTarot deck, and experiments in extreme experiential learning. She serves as Creative Producer of *The Artists’ Grief Deck*. Jenik has been written about in *The New York Times*, published in *The Drama Review*, and recognized by the Rockefeller Foundation. She serves as Professor of Intermedia at the School of Art, Arizona State University, affiliate faculty in the School for the Future of Innovation in Society and Desert Humanities Center, and is a global futures scientist in the Julie Ann Wrigley Global Futures Laboratory.



Li Sumpter, Ph.D. is a multidisciplinary artist and independent scholar who applies strategies of worldbuilding and mythic design toward building better, more resilient communities of the future. Li's creative research and collaborative design initiatives engage the art of survival and sustainability through diverse ecologies and immersive stories of change. Li is a cultural producer and eco-arts activist working through MythMedia Studios, the Escape Artist Initiative and various arts and community-based organizations in Philly and across the country. She holds an MA in Art and Humanities Education from NYU and a MA/Ph.D. in Mythological Studies and Depth Psychology from Pacifica Graduate Institute. Li is currently teaching at Haverford College and Moore College of Art and Design and has taught special topic courses for youth and adults at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, the Barnes Foundation and Fleisher Art Memorial.



Tal Beery is an artist, curator, and arts administrator. His written work and interviews have appeared in numerous publications including Art Papers, Spike Art, and Temporary Art Review. Beery's personal and collaborative works have been exhibited in museums and galleries in the US and Europe, including the 2012 Berlin Biennale, Brooklyn Museum, and the 2017 Whitney Biennial. His recent installation in the absence of a proper mourning transformed the public facing facade of the Jewish Museum of Baltimore into a site for collective mourning, sharing testimonials from Maryland residents who have had to say goodbye or memorialize their loved ones under conditions of social distancing.



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