

Danspace Project

and the both of them no one by Maura Nguyen Donohue

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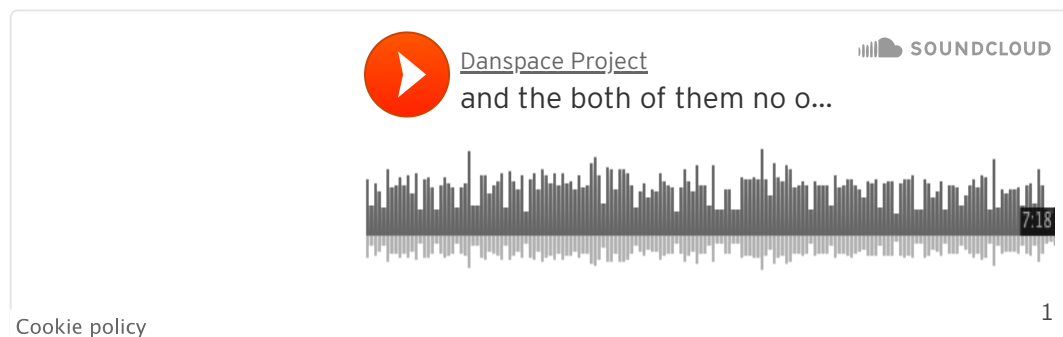
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Maura Nguyen Donohue is the Writer-in-Residence for Platform 2021: *The Dream of the Audience*.

“and the both of them no one” by Maura Nguyen Donohue reflects on *With the Earth at My Waistline*, a new short film from **Joan Jonas** and **Eiko Otake** commissioned for Platform 2021: *The Dream of the Audience*.

Read and/or listen below.



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I’ve spent a fair amount of time trying to explain to a recent Hunter grad not to worship artistic idols. Not that we shouldn’t admire those who channel stronger spirits into human artistic practices but we shouldn’t let some sense of idolatry confuse reverence for worship. And then...both Eiko Otake and Joan Jonas, the icons and pioneers that they are, expressed their relief that they hadn’t known too much about one another when they met. If they’d known how “important” the other was, they would have been too intimidated to develop the collaborative friendship that their Danspace Project **2020 Conversation Without Walls** details.

With the Earth at My Waistline is a new film by Otake and Jonas, created while in-residence both at Danspace’s historic venue in St. Mark’s Church and in Nova Scotia among Joan’s world of props, studio, kitchen and nearby woods. This was the first time anyone else had directed Eiko in performance. The premiere of the film was preceded by a **pre-recorded interview** between the collaborators and followed by a **live discussion** between the two. Listening to these formidable artists chat so casually, honestly, and comfortably is a gift to all questioning path, process, and sustainable experimentation with recurring themes.

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relieved to have another example, that some objects and ideas never leave us despite the archaic burden of innovation placed upon the front guard.

Though I was exhausted by screens but tonight, as I write during a second and third viewing [1], I feel like I'm in a company keeping experience (with much smarter friends). I feel like the sophomore who was allowed to watch the cool capstone kids build their honors projects. Yes, I catch myself casually wondering how many cuts there are, how many hours of captured footage (2, according to Joan in the conversation) there was to work through. I think because there was some conversation about how Joan would decide to edit, but the choices about what got to stay and how it sits next to anything else is still the magic of making that has no rubric.

Because of the magic, each viewing compounds a sense of joy throughout. Compounding joy is not a common experience, so I receive the gift of playing audience in the dream of this work as I feel the joy of making. The joy of sharing space. The joy of sharing time. The joy of fishtanks, submerged storytelling, and video of video. The joy of not wearing a mask. The joy of not being in NYC. The joy of being in NYC. The joy of a dog on the lap. The joy of a new encounter. The joy of failed angles. The joy of open air and soft edges. The joy of a turntable, Eiko's ponytail and a party dress.

Three works into the Platform's structure, I feel how these artists proclaim the nutritional value of intensive residency energy. The digital demands of the last year, set with the overwhelming loss and dormancy in a rearview mirror, show up in each week's works in manifold ways. Here, we glimpse an evolving working relationship in anti-ephemeral form. The outdoor footage in Nova Scotia precedes this Danspace, Platform 2021 commission but builds out the interiority that these two brilliant mavens explored during two weeks in St. Mark's Church. *With the Earth at My Waistline* is performance video art, indeed, as Eiko mentions in the post-conversation "there was performance energy." The tone was light with a sensibility that would shift in and out of directed, specific set ups and the wild, raucous delight of Joan, Eiko and collaborator/performer, Iris McCloughlan, dancing together.

The collaboration provides ample resourcing for working with someone who takes you out of your familiar patterns. In the conversation, Joan mentions being shy to perform and Eiko mentions the freedom of being directed by another. Grounded in a new, but solid friendship, two diverging aesthetic experts grew new possibilities. At one point, Joan reads Jack Spicer's "Ballad of the Shadowy Pigeons" (a translation of Federico García Lorca's "Of the Dark Doves") from large folded poster board that Eiko holds, while silhouetted in a window:

On the branches of laurel

Sat two shadowy pigeons.

The one was the other

And the both of them no one.

The shadowy nature of these two dark doves is temporal. I feel the synchronicity that follows their path, with them legendarily reaching out to Judy Hussie-Taylor within the same week to get the other's contact information after their first meeting [2]. The way they flow in and out of possibility of another convergence. During the conversation, the two detail their desire to do more together "before it's too late" while lightly pondering flight, fleeting meeting and the new space of finding one another through mediated structures. In the end, during the post performance discussion, Eiko's absence of pessimism, her articulated pleasure and pride at the premiere of this film, lights a balefire for everyone awakening to a new dream.

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I didn't want to blow this up...You are not me, so why does it matter? – Eiko

[1] I am allowed the privilege to return to *With the Earth at My Waistline* and the other works from the Platform and at this point in a year plus of mentoring, teaching and writing about screen-dances, I realize I'm feeling like some kind of a film critic and I'm catching and calling out my resistance to this. Do decisions of frame, angle, cutting rhythms, sound design, pacing matter (to me)?

[2] They mention this in both the post-premiere live discussion and their 2020 Conversation Without Walls.

Maura Nguyen Donohue is the Director of the MFA in Dance at Hunter College. Her last pre-pandemic, in-person days of 2020 included sharing breath and food as a member of Danspace Project's Kin and Care Research Group. Her "Whitelashing: White Fragility in the Ivory Tower" was part of Gibney Dance's inaugural volume of the journal *Imagining*, edited by Eva Yaa Asantewaa. She most recently wrote the Education Track Essay and Exercises in *Imagination* and served as a Keynote Panelist and Community Facilitator for DanceNYC 2021 Symposium. She has published academically in the collection *Contemporary Directions in Asian American Dance* and for the *Women and Performance Journal*. She has also written for *Culturebot*, *American Theater Journal*, *Dance Magazine*, the *Dance Insider*, *MR's Performance Journal* and was guest editor for *Critical Correspondence's* "University Project." . With La MaMa's Great Jones Repertory Company since 1997, she has toured the US, Europe and Asia. From 1995-2005 Maura Nguyen Donohue/inmixedcompany was commissioned and produced regularly in NYC and toured extensively across North America, Europe and Asia. As artistic advisor for Dance Theater Workshop's Mekong Project, Donohue curated and facilitated international exchange and residency programs for Asian diaspora artists in the US and Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. She continues to create and perform works in her "Tides Project" series, using reclaimed plastics and oceanic detritus to examine the legacies of bodies ecological and diasporic. She thanks the ancestors and the two incredible offspring for keeping the path clearly lit.

Tags: Eiko Otake, Joan Jonas, Maura Nguyen Donohue, Platform 2021



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