

Transcription

University of Minnesota Press

Episode: *Eco Soma* with Petra Kuppers (Art After Nature 2)

<https://soundcloud.com/user-760891605/eco-soma>

Background:

[*Eco Soma*](#) proposes an art/life method of sensory tuning to the inside and the outside simultaneously. Petra Kuppers asks readers to be alert to their own embodied responses to art practice, reading contemporary performance encounters while modeling a disability culture sensitivity to living in a shared world, oriented toward socially just futures. In this episode, Kuppers joins Giovanni Aloi and Caroline Picard, coeditors of the [Art after Nature](#) series, in a conversation that begins with an embodied journey and touches on questions of awareness, thought patterns, attention, capitalism, performance, language, identity, and disability culture.

[Petra Kuppers](#) is a community performance artist and disability culture activist. She is professor of [English](#) and [women's and gender studies](#) at the University of Michigan and serves on the faculty of the MFA in [Interdisciplinary Arts at Goddard College](#).

Dr. Giovanni Aloi is an author, educator, and curator specializing in the representation of nature and the environment in art. Aloi is editor in chief of [Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture](#).

Caroline Picard is a writer, cartoonist, curator, and executive director of [Green Lantern Press](#).

Intro:

Caroline Picard: Over the course of this book, there's a necessary relationship, somehow, between performance and language.

Giovanni Aloi: Part of the fascinating question here is: what would our lives be like, perceptually, if we hadn't been trained from the very beginning to perceive the world through this lens of capitalism?

Petra Kuppers: The pain gives me a form of attention that I do not necessarily choose. I do hope *Eco Soma* will do its labor in drawing attention to the rich aesthetic opportunities of disability culture perspectives.

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Aloi: I am Giovanni Aloi.

Picard: I'm Caroline Picard, and we are here to celebrate Petra Kuppers' new book, [*Eco Soma: Pain and Joy in Speculative Performance Encounters*](#).

Aloi: And it's our pleasure to remind everyone of our series, [Art After Nature](#), which explores the epistemological questions that emerge from the expanding, environmental consciousness of the humanities. Authors featured in this series engage with the recent ontological turn, upending anthropocentrism, in order to grapple with the dark ecological fluidity of naturecultures. The anthropogenic lenses of inquiry emphasize an ethical focus, foregrounding the more-than-human politics of our era. Caroline and I first conceived this series back in 2016, and more-than-human politics have become ever-more prominent today. The series emerged from our shared interest in contemporary art, and how the concept on the anthropocene, along with all its iterations, has given rise to what we may call a new genre in theory and practice. Caroline Picard is the executive director of the [Green Lantern Press](#), and I am the editor of [Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture](#) and author of books on the subject of animals and plants in art. It's a great pleasure to have Petra with us today.

Picard: [Petra Kuppers](#) is a community performance artist and disability culture activist. She is professor of [English](#) and [women's and gender studies](#) at the University of Michigan and serves on the faculty of the MFA in [Interdisciplinary Arts at Goddard College](#). Her most recent books include [Theater & Disability](#), and [Studying Disability Arts and Culture: An Introduction](#). We are so thrilled to have you with us. Thanks so much.

Aloi: It's a great pleasure to have you here, Petra.

Kuppers: Thank you so much for having me. Hello everybody. Thank you. I'm glad to be in this company, and I'm so glad to have my beautiful book in your series. I'm really delighted about that.

Picard: There is something really amazing I think, for me — seeing the manuscript in its initial form as a proposal, and then all of a sudden revisiting it as the galley. It was so exciting to read, and really lovely to read, especially in the moment that we're in. Maybe we could start most generally with: What is *Eco Soma*?

Kuppers: That is a great question. What is *Eco Soma*? Yes, that's kind of at the heart of things. I think in order to get you there, I'd love to take you on an embodied journey with me, if that's okay. That will be the best way for us to touch in with why I use the word "Eco Soma" as these

two words. Right? I'm using it "eco and "soma": "eco" as environment, the German word "umgeben," which means "that which surrounds us," and "soma," as embodiment, the body-mind, felt experience. You know, these two complexes, I put them right next to one, and see what emerges between the two of them. So I'm not just calling it "ecosomatic" — which is a word that now has some currency in our world — but I'm interested in the poetic field that happens when these two concepts — the environment and embodiment — come in contact with one another. Let's do that. So right now, I would invite you, dear listeners, if it's safe to do so — if you're driving a car, keep your eyes open — if you are listening and you're sitting somewhere, you might want to close your eyes, because it allow us to touch in with our other senses in a different way. I invite you to take a breath. And take another breath. And then I invite you to become aware of where you are sitting or standing or lying, right now. What is supporting you right now? Just become aware of this — likely an object, or a surface. What is it? What does it consist of? And in some parts of your body there will be, likely, cloth between you and that surface. Give a second's thought to the clothing, the fabric, that is touching you right now. So become aware of what is touching you. And now you can look at the label of your clothes, but you can also just kind of touch in with your senses and what you know. What is this material made of? What is touching you here? Just name it, as much as you can. Some things are a bit of a mystery to us, so just try to touch in with what you know, whether that might be cotton, it might be wool, it might be a contemporary oil-derived fabric. What is it? What kind of plasticky kind of stuff might be touching you? And then touch in with the surface you're on, and what is this made of? Maybe you're touching leather, animal skin. Maybe you're touching, again, a form of plastic, an oil-derived material. Maybe, again, this cotton or linen or wood or iron, steel. As you're naming these, just become aware of what swings in there with this material. Each of these materials come with a sociocultural history. You know, there [are] stories that swing in these materials. So when you think about leather, for instance, what swings in there with you? What stories of animals and human-animal relations [are] there with you? If you're sitting on wood, what do you know about forestation, deforestation, about supply chains, about insect resistance, about pesticides, about land reformation in order to grow woods or in order to take away woods for sheep — all these kinds of stories that might come up. Just see what comes up to you. That might be personal stories and these wider cultural stories. Maybe you're touching cotton and you're thinking about some of the wider stories of racialization as they pertain to this material and its history. But for right now, let's just focus on plastic-derived materials. Probably many of us right now — we're recording this in wintertime — are touched by some kind of plastic, some kind of plastic-derived material, oil-derived material. For a second, let's just check in with that. Where does this come from? So take another breath, and just review what you might remember from school. Where does this come from? What's the origin here? And maybe we're going all the way back to a very long way past, and to organic materials — forests, animals, falling into lakes, falling into seas, sedimentation, other earths are growing on top of those remnants. And then the pressure of the earth, deep pressure, pressure — feel it — pressure, as the material transforms over a very long period of time into what we now call oil. And then track how this

emerges to the surface, how humans excavate it, access it, where that might be in the world. Think about oil sand fields and toxic loads and indigenous communities up north. Think about other places that you know of. Let's just bring to our mind some of the richness of material connections across the globe that are part of what we're touching right now. And let's just sit with that. Let's just sit with that and feel that and feel at the same time the support that's running through you here as you're being held. So they are these stories, and then there is the support, the comfort, that the material offers you and your particular body right now as you sink in, as you release yourself to gravity, and as you're enjoying that sense of material on your skin. And it's that edge between comfort and discomfort that comes as part of being a human at this point in time, at this point in the supply chains, at this point in the technological developments of everything that we're touching — it's at that point that I locate eco soma, that moment of comfort and discomfort vibrating together at the same time — comfortable in my clothes and on my chair, and yet at the same time, there is that chafing of these cultural, biological, technological histories. That chafing creates, to me, that pearly glow that I associate with the poetics of eco soma.

Aloi: Great. That was a journey, Petra, and we're all back.

Kuppers: I'm glad everybody. Everybody back? And if you're driving, I hope you didn't close your eyes.

Aloi: Back and somewhat changed by the experience.

Kuppers: Yeah, how did it feel? How did it feel, Caroline and Giovanni? What happened?

Picard: It creates space for attention that I am conscious of all the time and feel subject to. Like on the one hand, I think there's a — at least I experience a — constant desire to reach for and implement my idea of what an ethical life would be, which would be nonexploiting, biodegradable, for instance, and there's a whole like long list. But I also think that each of those terms, or the ways that I would identify that type of ethics, each of those labels is very complex and complicated in terms of affordability, access, convenience also I think is a big one. So I suppose in some ways it's nice to have an opportunity to sit with that complexity.

Kuppers: Thank you.

Aloi: And I think you've tampered with capitalist bandwidths of attention and what those bandwidths allow us to perceive, our perception, as it is framed implicitly by that bandwidth. The idea of purpose, utility, the idea of why I'm sitting on this chair, always overrides that relationship. I think your journey helped [in] unearthing that relationship again. From the chair, the clothing, and all the way across the planet, there [are] webs of connections that capitalism

asks us to ignore every day so that we can function at the rhythm required by processes and the machinery of capitalism. Part of the fascinating question here is: what would our lives be like, perceptually — even on that level — if we hadn't been trained from the very beginning to perceive the world through this lens, and if we hadn't allowed that lens to naturalize itself so much that it's the only thing we deem normal? What if this were the normal? It made me think about how beautiful it would be if I could start my classes. I don't know if you've copyrighted this since we're in the capitalist lens. But [it is a] beautiful model to begin a class and bring your students. I often find that they are always scatterbrained, thinking about other assignments and somewhere else until fifteen minutes into class. They start to appear in their own kind of bodily presence and with their minds connected to that bodily presence that is essential to a discussion, that it's heartfelt and real, not [ticking] the box, “I've been in class discussing [and] opening my mouth.” I wonder if you've ever used it. Have you ever used it as a teaching practice?

Kuppers: Yes. I do, yeah. More or less every day, I do this kind of thing. Not every single day, but most of my classes begin with a meditation of some kind, often something like this, and we also just sit and pay attention. This is a related one, where we listen to the — again — the *umwelt*, the environment. We listen to the building we're in. We're just beginning to become aware of the heating system, the layers of care that surround us — and I'm talking about this quite a lot in *Eco Soma* as well, of course, in the book — the layers that surround us as we are in a space. So we listen and become aware of the sounds outside in the corridor, as we become aware of how we are in this space. I often dislocate the classroom in a very disability culture move moment. I ask people, for instance, to lie down on the ground, if they're comfortable with that, and we're looking up at the tables from beneath and exploring what it's like to be in a little cave underneath a table in the classroom. We listen to the strange creatures that seem to be inhabiting the heating ducts, because as soon as you start listening to heating ducts, there's all this symphony of sounds, which is really just materials shifting against one another and making sounds, but it has an incredible animate feeling to it when you begin to listen to it. If you listen hard enough, you can even hear the trees creaking outside. It becomes this really interesting layer — as you said — as we [are] letting go of the kind of attention that we're used to in a fast-paced capitalistic world, which is very goal-oriented, and we are opening up to the flavors and layers of what is available. Indeed, it functions as centering meditation, which means that when we get going with our classroom after these exercises, people are available to think in a very different way — you know, thought patterns. Throughout *Eco Soma* my invitations to readers — you might remember there are many moments where I'm asking people to become aware of either the book in their hand or their computer, the screen; I ask people to become aware of where they're sitting — all these moments where I'm inviting readers into a dialogue and often into a slowing down way, an opening up of attention that seems to me the core pedagogical aim of *Eco Soma*, to not necessarily just to slow us down, ultimately, but to give us some space to become aware of the multiple layers of what surrounds us. In one of the chapters in *Eco Soma*, I talk about *crip time*. I talk about this concept that has a lot of currency out there in disability culture worlds, and

that I'm tracking back to a particular disabled woman, Anne McDonald, in Australia who was institutionalized for most of her early life, and people didn't even assume that she was communicating. She was literally shut out [because of] her mode of communication. Once she was able to figure out how to be in touch with others through very slow, technologically mediated processes, she was then able to tell the rest of the world how it feels to be like a science fiction kind of alien character in a world where everything is moving so fast, and her extremely slow writing process, allowing us an insight into her mind, speaks about this world flying by. That is, for me, such a powerful moment of thinking through what crip time means in relation to capitalist time modes, to the ways we usually understand knowledge accumulation to happen, the way that we understand what it means to be a productive citizen in the world. Crip time holds against that in really intriguing ways. I'm tracking that through a number of our practices by different disabled people, not just disabled people, disabled people and other people who find themselves at odds with the white capitalistic, white supremacist project, that requires us to live in particular ways that not everybody wishes to live in or can live in.

Picard: Yeah, I loved the way you were mapping that onto time signatures and sort of bringing space, or creating space, around the idea that different individuals — let alone different groups of people, ways of life, also different species, objects — are operating on different time signatures, and how do we make space to be attentive to that? I'm also curious about how you came to develop this methodology.

Kuppers: Oh that's a lovely question. Yes. There's so many different origin points. I mean, there is the fact that I am a disabled woman and a woman living with pain, so that often means that I have to touch the world and be touched by the world. The form of attention that is forced upon me — the pain gives me a form of attention that I do not necessarily choose, but that I give myself to in order to explore the richness at that point. It's not like I have a choice about whether I'm in pain or not, but how I approach hard surfaces or anything that I move on, or even what I'm sitting on, is inflected through pain. By giving artful attention to those moments, I open up a world inside pain. Stepping from a car park toward a tree — you know that's just that one step, not a hike out into nature; that's not really given to me — but the one step over a curb — and sometimes a curb is inaccessible to me and I can't even do the curb — but you know, maybe the one glide with my wheelchair toward that tree, that is a moment that I can blossom up through an *Eco Soma* method. That blossoming up, that opening up, is for me that poetic richness that I find so exciting. So that's one origin point. Other origin points lie in a different kind of pain, and that is the pain of — this here is radio, so people don't know what I look like. I'm a white, cis queer woman, a woman of size, who's disabled. I'm here on Nishnawbe territory. I often, because I'm a performance person and living near Detroit, for instance, I find myself, I search for invitations into spaces that are not structured by the cultural rules by which I, as a German woman, grew up with. I'm German. I come from a perpetrator nation. I grew up with a clear understanding of what it meant to come from a perpetrator nation that tried to commit genocide. So what does that

mean, ethically, as I move out into the world? So I'm trying to find ways of being in environments that are not structured by my own cultural rules, and then again there is a form of pain, for me, a pain I have to be with. This is a pain I choose. You know this is not an unchosen one. In the first chapter, I'm in a rich and specifically named, black-framed environment by choreographer [taisha paggett](#). I'm exploring in that first chapter the intricacies of what it means, phenomenologically, to be a white, disabled woman entering into that space — not necessarily aware of the rules — sitting with the discomfort that is created here. Later on in the book, I talk [about] Tiffany [Lethabo] King, someone who wrote in [\[The\] Black Shoals](#) about the potential for black and indigenous healing. Tiffany King writes about forms of violence that have their own ways of contaminating, haunting or touching and caressing, whispering to the other. Spaces can be contaminated, can be haunted. The presence of, for instance, slavery and genocide lingers in places, and their presence can feel like not being fully able to expand your lungs. You know, that kind of writing is very powerful to me, and that's also, for me, part of *Eco Soma*, part of that pain that I am trying to be ethically present to just as much as I'm trying to be ethically present to the joy that emerges when I'm encountering those blossoming moments.

Aloi: There is something extremely personal, and yet universal, about pain. Pain has been used as a discriminant in the discourses of species. It has defined, for a long time, what was considered human and what was considered animal, [and] still impacts our discourses on these subjects today. We are going through these discourses again through plants and questions about plant sentience. So I was wondering what does *Eco Soma* do to identity politics?

Kuppers: Yes, it's a very interesting question because *Eco Soma* does emerge from a disability culture sensitivity, so there is a sense of a launching out from a particular perspective. There is an auto-ethnographic element of me telling a story of being in contact with art and people and nonpeople and nonhuman others, and the *umwelt* from a particular perspective. At the same time, I think *Eco Soma* also marks the fact that there's no certainty. I cannot rest in certainty about any one identity position, including whomever I'm encountering out there in the world. At times people mark a particular position, a particular location or identity, but even that constantly gets interestingly swirled and moved about by the environments, by the kind of conventions of art practices that surround these statements. *Eco Soma* is a document of questing and searching and being uncertain and stumbling and limping and getting things wrong and catching myself and noting when someone's mentioned to me that this particular kind of analysis relies on racialized stereotypes and I need to redo it. I'm marking that in the text; I leave it in. I'm leaving in some of the learning journeys. I'm leaving in some of the ongoing encounter journeys that are at the heart of *Eco Soma*. It's not a book about [a] particular kind of an identity politics of certainty. This is identity encounter, if you want to use that word — I'm not quite sure what the best word is to use here in this context — an awareness of a diverse and rich world that does not deny violences at the heart and violence in the ongoing encounter.

Picard: For me that also makes me want to ask about language, partly because you have been widely published as a poet and think poetically and write poetically. But then also I feel like over the course of this book, it seems to me that there's a necessary relationship somehow between performance and language, and that language periodically creates points of access that might not otherwise be available for various reasons, but also that you're sensitive about where and how you construct, linguistically, those points of access. In some cases, it's not appropriate, and you're very clear about that. But then in other places, it's often a very ekphrastic book — for instance where you're really describing concretely these artistic efforts or performances.

Kuppers: Yeah, thank you. Thanks so much. I love hearing about how you're receiving the book, and that was a beautiful formulation that you offered there. Thank you. I want to link that to my wider oeuvre — the work that I've been doing for a long time in disability culture. So much of the work I write about is what I might call minor key cultural moments. I rarely write about material that's been written about by other people. We're going to a puppetry show in the [Dreamland Theater](#) — a very tiny little outfit here in Ypsilanti, Michigan. I'm spending pages talking about this show that — as far as I know — hasn't even been videotaped. There's no verification anybody can do. I'm not engaging in work that has a lot of critical hold out there because I'm so excited by community performance. I love work that's created in relation, and often in complex relations. I talk a lot about Indigenous and settler collaborations in one of the chapters. And again I'm talking about work that doesn't get a lot of critical attention because it falls out of the categories of what art criticism usually engages with, including social practice art criticism. You know, it's a different kind of work. I am very aware of the ethics of being a witness, of what it means to be a witness and to be someone who reports from this work, someone who also marks what the limits of that reporting are. Both of those moments seem really important to me, and I know that some readers find it intriguing and at times complicated that I withhold certain information — like there's always moments where I think something is communicated — something that might be very private, that I might not have permission to share, that I culturally might not have permission to share, even if I have an inkling of what might be going on. I foreground my own experience of the work in a way that can be complicated. But what I'm really trying to do is to invite everybody to become that kind of an ethical witness, to work, to understand that there are always limits. There is no specialist or someone with a PhD who can narrate an authoritative account of what this particular thing is. Instead, that sensory richness that I introduced at the beginning of the session here when we were being in this meditative mode is something that's available to all of us, and that all the associations that we're bringing up are valuable and interesting and could become a space of meditation. So I do think that poetic linguistic play that I'm offering in relation to how I describe these performances is a democratizing tool. It's a tool that I'm offering to people to think about anything they wish to think about. There's so many invitations where I'm inviting people to think about: what's your response? I give video links, for instance. Many of the things in there have video links, so people can see something of the work, and then I'm asking you to think about:

what did you experience as you are witnessing this? And your experience is important and interesting and not superseded by the partial account that I'm giving.

Aloi: Petra, that is wonderful. It reminds me of conversations that Caroline and I began in 2015 just before we got the collaboration with University of Minnesota Press going for this series. The starting point was this acknowledgement that we can no longer rely on older and trite art historical patterns to engage with artworks, but that a major shift was taking place, and that this major shift was being caused by different strata that were moving at the same time — some involved in ecological shifts we were experiencing but also cultural changes. We felt that new methodologies to talk about art and to foreground the agency of the encounter were emerging and needed to be focused upon. That's really where our series began to emerge. I remember at the very beginning, Caroline and I perhaps were more concerned with the word "criticism" and if ever that word might make any sense in these conversations today. Then eventually Doug and Peter at University of Minnesota Press helped us move past that obstacle. Your book really incarnates so much of what our concern was. I also wanted to add to Caroline's perspective. I really think you're a compelling writer. Just returning to the text was so refreshing in the context of where I am in my journey as a writer, but also in the context of a sense of pride that there is a possibility to produce academic writing that is scholarly sound and valuable, and that is also extremely enriching to the soul. There's something in your writing that really jumps out of the page and transports you that suggests a very powerful encounter. I think we're very very proud, basically, we can have you so early on in the series as a marker of this important change.

Kuppers: Thank you so much. I'm very moved. Thank you. I do point in the book — I'm using the term "bodymindspirit" many, many times. I think there is a lot of richness to opening ourselves up to multiple ways of sensing, thinking, being and writing the world. So I am just so glad that that is arriving with you in this way.

Picard: Can you talk about how a book like this also relates to your poetry practice?

Kuppers: Yeah, well so here was me writing *Eco Soma*, and of course the pandemic came along and slowed things as it did for so many of us. So the final two years of the book were a slow process. I always — whenever I have an academic book going, which is more or less all the time — I also have a different project going on at the same time. My brain, and my bodymindspirit, needs different forms of engaging. So, my [Gut Botany](#), which came out in March 2020 with [Wayne State University Press](#), is an eco-somatic poetry collection that enacts also many of the principles that I am discussing in *Eco Soma*. So now some of the workshops that I'm leading out there, some of the readings that I do, combine these two books and the approaches, the methods that I'm discussing in them. So there's an actual poetry book about that sensing that I'm describing — the slowing sensing; the engagement, in particular, with watery realms; engagement with pain and joy and with eros and with survival. So in *Gut Botany*, the particular

story is one of survival from sexual assault enacted through a close and speculative layering into lakes, forests, the location that I'm in, as again from an awareness of being a settler on Indigenous land. So there [are] a lot of similarities between the two books, and one is in the register, the genre, of the expanded critical book and the other one in the genre of performance poetry. So I find it really intriguing now to construct workshops that allow me to combine these methods and again to always invite people who participate in these workshops to become producers of their own cultural material in their own right. So it's just very much both books of the emphasis on “now you,” you know — how can we enrich ourselves by becoming aware of all the differences of perception that we have in the room?

Aloi: Petra, I think we could be talking forever about writing and the territories you map through writing and that you generate through writing. In preparation of this conversation, I've returned to an instance I experienced a few years ago. I don't think I've quite managed to find a satisfactory ground upon which to rest or what happened. So I wanted to ask your perspective on perception of disability in the context of age and time passing. Just to give you an idea of the context: I was at an event on the work of [Yinka Shonibare](#), and the lady sitting next to me, who asked for the mic, asked a question about disability to the curator who was on stage holding a conversation with the scholar. The question focused on the fact that disability is often overlooked by curators in artistic context, that the art world is lagging behind, severely, when it comes to disabilities, and that she was complaining about the idea that, even in the case of Yinka Shonibare — who is living with transverse myelitis — the conversation about disability seemed to remain marginal, at least in the conversation that was unfolding that day. The curator decided to address the question by saying, “Oh, you're absolutely right. This is an important topic for everyone. After all, all of us will be affected by disabilities because of age.” The lady next to me was extremely disappointed by that response, and it was only then that I looked at her and in the twilight of the theater I noticed that she was living with a disability, and for what I could tell, the curator on stage wasn't. Of course there's a lot of assumptions going on here, but I just could not quite find my handle on that specific exchange — what it meant to somebody like me who's part of the LGBTQ+ community and yet not directly sharing life with a disability.

Kuppers: Yeah, thanks. Complicated, right? The main thing to say is [that] disability is still very underrepresented in the art world, indeed. I mean I think it's shifting quite a bit, and I want to celebrate the rich successes and newly emerging networks that surround me now. I mean, I'm definitely in a very different space and my embedment in the disability culture community than say where we all were ten or or twenty years ago. Even ten years ago, even five years ago, there was a lot less than there is now. I think things are shifting somewhat, and I think both the disability justice movement — but also allied with [the] [Black Lives Matter](#) [movement], with [the] Me Too [movement], with the various movements out there — have really shifted our thinking, our wider cultural thinking, about difference, violence, suppression and what can be gained if we all look at cultural formations that are not just the old dominant forms. I think

there's just a lot of richness out there. I so recognize that woman's moment of frustration. I mean, obviously you know like, for things to be washed away by saying, we're all going to get disabled eventually. Well yes, maybe, but right now we're still living in the world where so many places don't have access — you can't get in — where lots of arts events, in particular, don't think about access, don't think about disability as a facet of diversity. It's not something that is on many people's radar, or it's only on people's radar as an access issue, not as an aesthetic issue. How can these two things — access and aesthetics — become more interestingly intertwined? That is a journey that so many contemporary disability culture artists and writers are engaged with. You know, I understand the frustration. At the same time, as someone who's also by now, you know, I'm in my 50s — which is not really very old yet, but I'm also in a cripp body, and I'm a disabled woman, and I do think aging shifts some of us differently from people who are not experiencing disability — so I do have maybe a little bit more of a touch into that into that aging world through that. I do think that there is a new disability culture world opening when you're entering into aged environments when people can be more gentle with one another, can be more aware of time shifting, can be more aware of even cranky body-minds. So we're holding ourselves better once in a certain kind of aging moment as well. So there's both moments going on. I hope I'm making myself clear here. The frustration is real. The neglect is real. I do hope that *Eco Soma* will do its labor in drawing attention to the rich aesthetic opportunities of disability culture perspectives on performance, on contemporary art, on criticism that emerges from a disability culture perspective. I hope that that will be part of its mission out there in the world, part of what it wants to do in the world. And I'm also, of course, trying to raise awareness of so many amazing artists out there who are doing fabulous work. So I never want to be someone at this point in 2022 who says there isn't anything out there, because that would be so wrong. I do want to celebrate the richness of what is out there. And yet, I also want to stress again and again: curators who are listening to this, performance organizers who are listening to this — think about disability as something else than just that one thing that you program once in a season. How can you make disability culture approaches infuse everything — just as we're trying to be much more aware about how racialized exclusions have shifted our canons, shifted what we're seeing — how can we use the same kind of attention to speak about disability issues, queer issues, or the other issues that are out there?

Picard: That makes me also want to ask you about the [Salamander](#) workshops, and just if you could talk a little bit about that — how they started. There's some really beautiful descriptions of it in the book, but it would be great to hear it live, too.

Kuppers: Yes, thank you. So one of the chapters looks at watery realms and one of the projects that I'm discussing, this is one of my own projects. A lot of the chapters discuss many other artists and then usually come back to one project that — either the [Olimpias](#) or [Turtle Disco](#), these kind of wider ranges of artists that I work with — that we've created ourselves. So that's kind of one of the structures throughout the book. So in one of the chapters I talk about the

Salamander. The Salamander emerged when someone who just very recently became part of our disability culture ancestors, Neil Marcus — [he passed just very recently](#) — you know, it's still very sad to talk about it, and I'm very glad to celebrate his work. I know he had so looked forward to this coming out, and you know there'd be more talks about it all, because we of course co-presented this so many times over so many years. He knew about the book and he knew about, you know, of course all his work in it. So I'm glad that you're mentioning it. He was a someone who lived with a spastic form of embodiment and a thin conventional communication way of working in the world, and yet he was highly expressive. You know he was a wonderfully expressive human being that very quickly established contact, if not through linguistic means, then through other means. He needed to exercise more, so at this point when we started Salamander he just needed to exercise. He got very tight — spasticity does that to him — but he hated exercise. Who doesn't, right? I mean, he didn't want to do exercise for exercise's sake. He didn't want to do that. He loved being in front of a camera, though. He just would do anything in front of a camera. He was a born actor and performer. So we got this underwater camera and went to the pool, and he jumped into the water and performed underwater. We captured the gems of these wonderful performances underwater, and they are just gorgeous documents of vitality and life and being in contact with other kinds of realms. I mean that's just so gorgeous. So very quickly we figured out that this project had a lot of juice, and we invited our friends, our disability culture friends — basically our disabled friends — to join us. For years we ran these delicious workshops where we just went swimming together. We had this attention to Eco Soma, this attention to, well, what does it mean to go into a swimming pool and have to decide between binary gender models for your changing habit? You know, for whom is it safe to go to a public swimming pool, and for whom is it safer to go to a natural swimming hole somewhere? Then we had to think about chlorine, about toxicity in the environment, about water. So you know all these issues came up in really rich and complex ways, and people wrote about them themselves. So part of the project is that we invited people to write their responses to being in this communal exploration of freedom in the water and pain and fear and all of those things in the water together. In the chapter in the book, I montage these responses. So I'm specifically stepping back from being — as we talked about earlier — from being that single voice that witnesses everything, and instead we have a rich montage of multiple people using multiple genres to narrate their experiences of being in the water together. Sharing these delicious, disability culture moments with the world was just wonderful. Neil traveled with me, and we did lots and lots of the workshops together. Later on I also traveled lots by myself. I managed to do this on Australian beaches with white crystalline sand, in a river that might or might not have bull sharks in it, thermal baths in Germany. In Sweden, I worked with [Spinn](#) dance company, which is an integrated dance company in Sweden. They invited me out to choreograph a Salamander performance on an island off the Swedish coast that was only accessible to disabled people. You needed to have a cripp badge to get on. And for this one day we opened up the gates and had nondisabled people come and join us on this island, which has all the criptech. You can get your wheelchair very, very close to the sea, and then they have a seat that goes down into the sea,

literally, so as a disabled person you can go swimming in the sea, which is so amazing. Such an amazing, beautiful thing to do. Right in the middle of the island is a warm pool, and in that warm pool we had the final performance. Disabled, nondisabled people were dancing together underwater like a contact improvisation dance performance with the company members being skilled in how to do it and the audience being involved in it. So if you wanted to see the show you ended up in your bathing suit in the water dancing with us. It was glorious.

Aloi: Petra, this is a marvelous image, and perhaps also a great image [with] which we might bring our conversation to an end today, of course with the invitation of resuming through your book.

Kuppers: Thank you. That was beautiful. Thank you for allowing me to revisit the Salamander project here right now, in particular Neil Marcus's memory. He knew that all the images were in the book, and that his writing was in the book, and he was excited about it. And I'm glad to honor his memory here right now. Thank you for the beautiful conversation. That was just very rich, and I appreciate it so much.

Aloi: Thank you for being with us, my friend. It's been amazing. Thank you again.

Picard: And congrats on your [book](#). We're so lucky to be able to post it.

Kuppers: Lovely.

Notes:

Eco Soma is available to read for free at Manifold. <https://manifold.umn.edu/projects/eco-soma>