

Natalie Alvarez, Claudette Lauzon, and Keren Zaiontz, eds.,
Sustainable Tools for Precarious Times: Performance Actions
***in the Americas*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019,**
343 pp. 24 b/w and 10 colour illus., \$139.99 US (hardcover)
ISBN 9783030115562, \$109.00 US (eBook) ISBN 9783030115579

Andrea Terry

Volume 46, Number 1, 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078082ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078082ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Terry, A. (2021). Review of [Natalie Alvarez, Claudette Lauzon, and Keren Zaiontz, eds., *Sustainable Tools for Precarious Times: Performance Actions in the Americas*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 343 pp. 24 b/w and 10 colour illus., \$139.99 US (hardcover) ISBN 9783030115562, \$109.00 US (eBook) ISBN 9783030115579]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 46(1), 133–134. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078082ar>

Natalie Alvarez, Claudette Lauzon, and Keren Zaiontz, eds.

Sustainable Tools for Precarious Times: Performance Actions in the Americas

Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019

343 pp. 24 b/w and 10 colour illus.

\$ 139.99 US (hardcover)

ISBN 9783030115562

\$ 109.00 US (eBook) ISBN 9783030115579

Andrea Terry

Sustainable Tools for Precarious Times: Performance Actions in the Americas is a timely, compelling, and insightful collection of essays focused on the achievements, tactics, and sustainable strategies of activist performance that emerged in the aftermath of the global Occupy movement. In the wake of the world being knocked off its axis by widely ranging governmental responses to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the collection's primary themes and purpose merit keen and sustained attention. As editors Alvarez, Lauzon, and Zaiontz explain, "Sustainable tools and time-sensitive tactics that defy the habitual and enact more democratic futures are needed to aid communities caught in the throes of political violence, manufactured austerity, and environmental disasters" (10). *Sustainable Tools* features a series of case study analyses of art-activist projects across the Americas, interspersed with artist's pages—contributed by: L.M. Bogad; ATSA; Hank Willis Thomas and Erik Gottesman; subRosa; Escola de Ativismo; micha cárdenas, Patrisse Cullors, Chris Head and Edxie Betts; Syrus Marcus Ware; Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, with Suné Woods; Cannupa Hanska Luger; and Leah Decter, with Stop Violence Against Aboriginal Action Group—described by the editors as "first-person perspectives of artists working on the 'frontlines' of interventionist art." More precisely, they position the

collection as "both an archive and a how-to-manual documenting ways of keeping effective interventionist strategies in circulation" (3) across the Americas. A product of the 2015 working session at the American Society for Theatre Research in Portland, Oregon, and the 2015 panel at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education in Montreal, Quebec, the content and structure aims to foster interdisciplinary dialogue among artists, activists, and scholars of art and performance studies. The contributors collectively take into account recent performance studies scholarship examining how theatre and performance respond to "the erosion of social welfare under the always contextually specific operations of neoliberalism" (14). Accordingly, this collection explores how art and performance unite to bring about transgressive or resistant acts, "the highest form of politically efficacious art" (11).

Both the chapters of case studies and the artists' pages focus on projects undertaken in recent years across the Americas that, in their varied development, found methods to generate sustainable action and push back against "... the combined forces of neoliberalism's market-liberal policies of privatization and deregulation, authoritarian regimes, and forms of neocolonialism advanced by extractive industries" (4). Significantly, in the introduction, the editors point out that national boundaries function as colonial constructs, which "often stood as necessary and 'natural' delimitations of scholarly inquiry foreclosing Pan-American and Indigenous methodologies, paradigms, and practices" (3). They effectively lay the groundwork for an expansive understanding and appreciation of the collection's geopolitical range, traversing Canada, the US, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, and Colombia, as well as Indigenous territories across Turtle Island. The chapters and artists' pages examine artists' and arts activists' micro-movements,

which call attention to varied states of precarity brought about by various trade macro-structures, such as NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) and ALADI (Asociación Latinoamericana de Integración, or the Latin American Integration Association). For example, contributors Daniella Wittern Bush and Jennifer Beth Spiegel both examine, in their chapters, the interventionist strategies deployed in university student protests opposing rising tuition costs and increased student debt, Wittern Bush focusing on the 2011 Chilean student movement and Spiegel the 2012 Quebec student protests. In emphasizing cross-continental alliances, as well as tools, strategies, and projects that showcase the "mobilizing power of creative collaboration and activism" (22), the collection reminds readers that fostering creative connections across time and space is necessary, perhaps now more than ever. In so doing, the collection speaks to a recent spate of publications bent on exploring connections among art, activism, and social justice, such as Kirsty Robertson's book *Tear Gas Epiphanies: Protest, Culture, Museums* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019), Kylie Message's study *Collecting Activism: Archiving Occupy Wall Street* (Routledge, 2019) and *Museum Activism*, edited by Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell (Routledge, 2019). By examining processes that take place outside of cultural institutions, choreographed action plans that reconstruct "planes of visibility" to promote recognition, mediation, and change, *Sustainable Tools* distinguishes itself as a collection focussed on "performance repertoires" that reproduce and sustain "multigenerational and multisited advocacy grounded in strong social bonds and transformed social logics" (12).

In the introduction, the editors set the stage for a more nuanced and informed appreciation of how 2011 marks a watershed moment in both the practice and theory of

art-activism. In taking the Occupy movement as the collection's jumping-off point, the editors point out that, "despite the message of income inequality, and the claim to represent everyone, Occupy failed to galvanize Black and brown communities" (8). They go on to make connections between the goals, organization, and structure of the Idle No More movement of 2012 and the "persistent, decades-long actions of the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo who, since 1977, have demanded accountability and justice for the disappeared during Argentina's military dictatorship (1976–1983) and in the US civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s..." (4). These genealogies of sustained social mobilization and action, the editors go on to explain, extend back decades and even centuries, underscored by the resistance, resilience, and *survival*, as defined by Gerald Vizenor, of Indigenous people. Moreover, the editors ground this analysis by starting the collection off with an interview with Occupy co-founder Micah White, conducted by editors Natalie Alvarez and Keren Zaiontz, and conclude it with an interview with Cree/Métis artist Cheryl L'Hirondelle, who explains how her songs and sonic mapping sustain her creativity. *Sustainable Tools* signals how reflections on shortcomings of past movements can bring about the advent of new and ultimately sustainable tools and tactics based in the arts.

In its focus on strategic and sustainable—as opposed to contingent—tactics, the contributors all foreground those strategies that deploy visual devices, both in-person and online, and invite participatory action. For example, Wittern Bush charts how Chilean university students planned and performed the 2011 "flash mob" protest in the Plaza de la Cuidanía, located across from the Chilean Presidential Palace,

in Santiago. Over 3,000 students staged an activist re-enactment of Michael Jackson's 1982 music video "Thriller," the first in a series of demonstrations calling attention to issues with Chile's "largely privatized, for-profit educational system" (70). In this performance, students posed as zombies—like in Jackson's video—with make-up and tombstones around their necks recording the amount of student debt they would owe when they graduate. She goes on to point out that students "... realized that the only way to combat a profit-driven model of education is through interventions that they know will sell. Their musical selection reflects this principle" (83). Not only was Michael Jackson's *Thriller* album one of the best-selling original music albums of all time, the 2006 Guinness World Records listed the album as "'the most successful music video,' having sold more than nine million copies at that point" (83). Cognizant of the precarious nature of its primary participants who progress through the university system in approximately four years, the movement organizers shot video recordings of each performance and then produced a digital online record of this work, simultaneously generating international media attention and ensuring these performances remain publicly available and accessible in the years to follow. In pointing out the technological advances that have helped generate the global momentum of various social justice movements, the editors and contributors also call out the shortcomings or hindrances, such as how "digital activism" can become diluted and degenerate into "clicktivism" (13).

Significantly, Wittern Bush concludes her analyses with seven "lessons" learned from the Chilean student movement for readers to mount sustainable protest movements. One speaks to the strategy of artistic appeal and creativity to increase investment and participation in these movements.

"Aesthetics are important," Wittern Bush writes, "Dissidence can be fun, appealing, and beautiful without losing its meaning" (89). Another lesson signals how protest movements depend on many players. "Play both sides. Change does not *have* to come from beyond the system. It's vital to have feet on the street, but those voices might be louder when complimented by hands in government chambers" (89). Everyone can play a role and, sometimes, you have to be creative when you choose and/or define yours. ¶

Andrea Terry is Director of the StFX Art Gallery at St. Francis Xavier University.
—aterry@stfx.ca