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How Little is Enough? A quest for existential sustainability

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Existential Sustainability is a term that has recently caught the attention of scholars across the academic field e.g. sociology, health, religion, arts, and design. The term concerns systematic care and innovative means to meet fundamental human needs. In the article the term is explored through the artistic research project, How Little is Enough? Sustainable Methods of Performance for Transformative Encounters, where existential sustainability transcends all layers of the project; on personal level, in the artistic method, and in both content and format of the artistic work. The article discusses how artistic experiences can be understood as a human need and how the four performances of the project address existential sustainability. The film deals with the driving force of change and gives a personal account of what it means to be an artist striving to be existentially sustainable.

Keywords: Existential sustainability; Sustainability; participatory performance; immersive performance; artistic research; relation specific performance; transformative encounters; site specific performance; human specific performance; performative encounters; human needs; theatre&performance



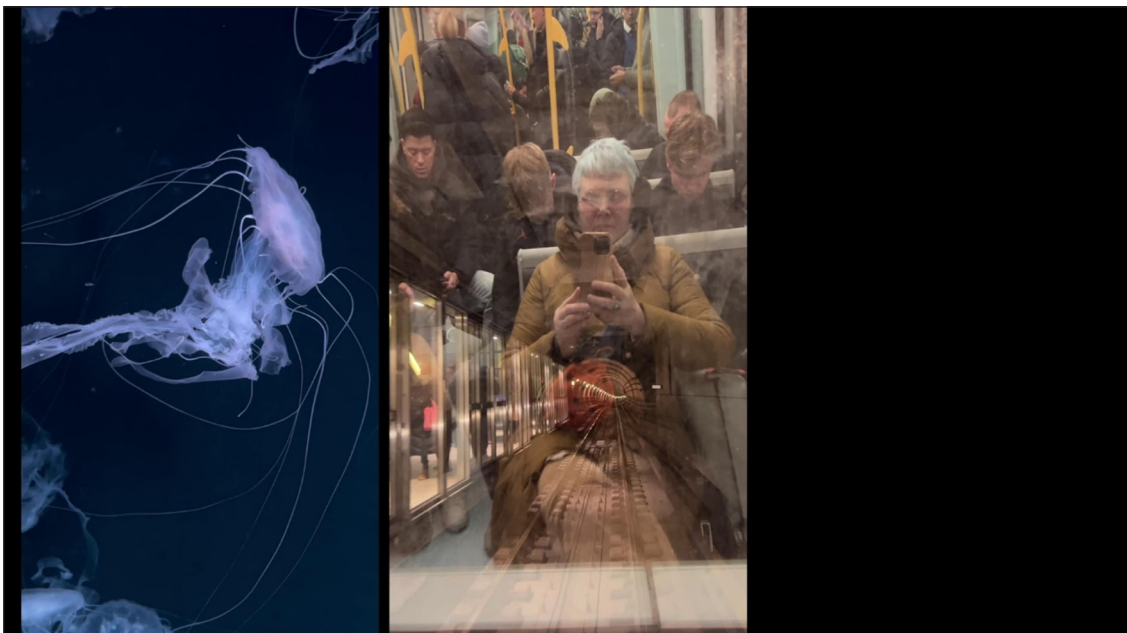
VIDEO ARTICLE

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VIDEO ARTICLE TRANSCRIPT

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[00:10]

How Little is Enough? A Quest for Existential Sustainability

[00:18]

Photos and footage in this film were taken on my phone 2020 - 2023

[Steinunn Knúts Önnudóttir]

Let me introduce you to my chair, it is in my flat in Malmö, where I am based.
The chair is there to support me.

[00:32]

Steinunn Knúts Önnudóttir

[Steinunn Knúts Önnudóttir]

I am a theatre maker living in a precarious world that faces serious challenges. Global warming is imminent and social and economical injustice is widespread and threatens the livelihood of many. My old lifestyle is no longer sustainable and my way of making art must change.

For some years I have been moving towards a minimal performance practice, reducing production, and paying attention to what is needed. Instead of producing new things I work with relation-specific performances where I create connections between human and non-human agents, draw the attention to things already present and ask what is worth sustaining.

In my research project, How Little is Enough? Sustainable Methods of Performance for Transformative Encounters, I am developing an artistic method that is ecological and existentially sustainable for all agents involved.

Existential sustainability is a new transdisciplinary term that scholars from diverse academic fields have started unpacking in disciplines like theology, architecture, and medicine.

In this essay I will follow my quest for existential sustainability in my artistic practice and share with you my challenges in maintaining my own existential sustainability. I will look at how existential sustainability can be seen in my performances as a content, form, and method.

I invite you to contemplate the sustainability of a single human being.

A person that lives an ordinary life sustaining their basic needs and on top of that have been called to transform their behaviour to sustain human life on the planet. A person that is ready to do what it takes but is overwhelmed by the bleak prospects and feels inadequate.

This person can be me; it can be you, or it can be one of my guests.

How can this person sustain their motivation to act in the world?

To me the human spirit is the greatest energy source that mankind has and without it we cannot sustain our species.

The human spirit affects our mind and body and is a limited energy source that all too often is emptied with severe consequences to individual people and their surroundings. The medical diagnosis is burn out, a mental and physical exhaustion that leaves a person paralysed.

When I say spirit, I am referring to the source of motivation to act that is based on the spiritual, the ethical and the personal attachments to humans and the more-than-human that surrounds us.

To me the spirit is an engine that is anchored to my values, worldview, and my love for the world. This engine needs fuel to run.

I agree with artist researcher Magali Ljungar-Chapelon that is dealing with existential sustainability and the arts, when she says.

[04:34]

“Existential health refers to intertwined physical, mental and social aptitudes enabling human beings to reflexively experience disease, infirmity and well-being and is a sine qua non for existential sustainability.”

(Ljungar-Chapelon 2022, 1)

[Steinunn Knúts Önnudóttir]

Yes, for me existential sustainability has to do with health but also in being wholesome, living in accordance with your values and taking care of your wellbeing.

Agenda 2030, UN’s sustainable development agreement, rests on three main pillars, economical, social, and environmental and in the agenda’s 17 transformational goals individuals are expected to adapt a sustainable behaviour, to change consumer habits, lifestyle and increase civic engagement but there is no mention of the existential dimension.

Human needs are mentioned in relation to achievement but not as a prerequisite.

My claim is that if we do not have the energy to make change to our behaviour we will not. We cannot save human life on the planet until we have connected to our existential energy-source. A source of motivation.

Personally, I am driven by care and affection.

I love the world I live in, an imperfect world in constant transition.

Through the things I love, the people around me and more-than-human world that I am engaged with, I become motivated to sustain the qualities that I enjoy, for my children and the generations to come.

In the work I make, I want to give people an opportunity to explore what constitutes quality of life to them and through a performative encounter with another human or more-than-human, create a situation where the guests can experience an enchantment of the everyday life through the eyes of the other.

I like to look at artworks as a micro cosmos and in my performances, I aim to provide a framework to exercise or contemplate our needs.

Quality of life has been a focal point in my work.

[07:12]

“Quality of life depends on the possibilities people have to adequately satisfy their fundamental human needs.”

(Max-Neef 1991, 16)

[Steinunn Knúts Önnudóttir]

says the Chilean economist Manfred Max-Neef that has developed a taxonomy of human needs and satisfiers widely used in sustainable development.

According to Neef the basic human needs are subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, recreation, creation, identity, and freedom.

Though I have used Max-Neef’s comprehensive list in my work I have been inspired by the psychologist Abraham Maslow that created a hierarchy of human needs, dividing them into five basic categories. Physiological needs as the foundation, safety, and security on top of that, then love and belonging, self-esteem and self actualisation. After a lifetime of research into human needs, Maslow added the need for knowledge and aesthetics together with the need for spirituality that he placed on the top of his pyramid.

I can see my artwork inside Maslow’s pyramid of needs with a tactile and embodied foundation and a spiritual top head, stimulating the aesthetic sense and giving the guests a space to exchange knowledge and perspectives. But there is no hierarchy nor a pyramid in my work, if any shape – it is circular.

As many scholars, Ljungar-Chapelon is critical towards the hierarchy based on Maslow’s pyramid.

[09:03]

“In the pyramid of human needs art is often wrongly placed at the last level whereas it instead should be depicted as grounding mortar at its basement, binding all levels together because, by expressing what it means to be human, art deeply can contribute to give life a meaning and keep us going.”

(Ljungar-Chapelon 2022, 11)

[Steinunn Knúts Önnudóttir]

While I truly agree that art can connect us to a larger picture of our existence, I choose to understand my work not only as an aesthetic element towards the top

of the pyramid of need but as an embodied practice that transcends the different layers, disarming any argument that the arts should be fixed to one place in the hierarchy.

Art and design are imbedded in the everyday environment of most people, and I see my work as an entangled practice that is based on a profound existential need to create connections on all levels of existence, to oneself, others, and the more-than-human environment.

As for existential sustainability as a term it can be traced through all the layers of my practice, from my personal wellbeing, through my artistic methods into the form and content of the performances. It can be separated into different dimensions but will be felt and understood by the participants in its entangled form through the experiences.

My artistic inquiry is situated within a context of participatory performing arts, social engagement, and ecological art making, drawing influence from ecotherapy and Buddhist worldviews. The urgency to respond to the global crisis I share with many contemporary artists that are busy with creating spaces for exchange, contemplation, and imagination through personal and embodied art experiences. This is the territory I am exploring with my project.

[11:10]

Rimini Protokoll DE, Building Conversations NL, Marina Zurkow US, Gylleboverket SE, Wrights & Sites UK, helloearth! DK, Mannyrkjustöðin IS

[Steinunn Knúts Önnudóttir]

The research project consists of four performances, No Show, Island, Strings and Pleased to Meet you, that in different ways invite the public to contemplate their own needs, values and beliefs through the eyes of the other.

[11:38]

No Show

A performative encounter with a stranger.

Performed in Reykjavík 2020 at Reykjavík Art Festival.

[Steinunn Knúts Önnudóttir]

In No Show, a guest was invited into a private home where the host was absent. In solitude the guest would travel through the home and read personal letters from

the host where they share some personal details and described their everyday rituals.

The guests were invited to perform assignments: To re-enact everyday rituals, to pay attention to outer or inner movements and to deal with existential questions related to their own life and values. The work deals with everyday politics of priorities and consumption patterns. The work is also about care, selfcare, close relations, sense of identity and our needs as human beings. As a relation specific work, the performance is a slice of life, and the work goes as deep as the guests are willing and capable of going.

Here the work invites the guest to roll dice, a recreational activity practiced in this home.

While rolling the dice, the guest is asked to contemplate the role of luck in their lives and how they deal with their share in life.

[13:06]

Island

A performative encounter with the community in Hrísey.

Performed in Hrísey 2020 at A! Performance Festival.

[Steinunn Knúts Önnudóttir]

The Island, an encounter with a small community on an island north of Iceland, deals with what it means to belong. After sailing to the island, the guests were greeted by the children of the community that guided the guests around their island, into private homes, community spaces through secret places and into the landscapes. The guests were asked to perform tasks as individuals and as a group and were given questions to discuss and things to contemplate. The theme of belonging would manifest through the encounters between humans and non-humans. Again, the topic of quality of life and human needs cut through the layers of the experience, through the embodied and tactile entanglements and personal connections.

In the piece the dramaturgy and the aesthetics lead the audience into the mindset of the migrant bird a perspective that challenge the notion of belonging.

For the migrant bird belonging needs to be negotiated.

[14:20]

Strings

A performative encounter with Agenda 2030 Graduate School.

Performed in Lund and Malmö 2022

[Steinunn Knúts Önnudóttir]

Strings, a performative encounter with a group of researchers, explores the driving force of change. The group was my own Graduate School, a transdisciplinary research school of more than 20 PhD fellows dealing with topics related to UN's Agenda 2030. Firstly, we invited guests for a one-on-one performative encounter at the researchers' workstations in the different departments of University of Lund focusing on personal motivation. We worked with childhood memories and the significant elements of formation.

Secondly, we held a performative research training camp for the public, driven by the question what is worth sustaining?

In the camp, a four-pillar research training model built on care, connection, empathy, and love, was presented.

The work invited the participants, guests, and hosts, to delve into their personal stories and look at their attachments to find their driving force.

[15:37]

Pleased to Meet You

A performative encounter with the more-than-human.

Performed in Reykjavík at Reykjavík Dance Festival/Lokal 2022, and in Malmö at IAC 2023.

[Steinunn Knúts Önnudóttir]

The fourth and last work of my research project is Pleased to meet you, a performative encounter with the more-than-human. The work explores our entanglement with the surroundings and invites guests to test their ability to empathise with nonhuman things and phenomena.

The guests borrow a new perspective and are invited to look at them selves as a part of a larger biosphere and pay attention to the agency of things. The guests

will have a dialogue with a lamp about energy and networks, talk about time with a pond and give a speech to the community of birds.

The four performances give a framework for certain realities, topics, questions and invite participants to encounter beings, stories, sites, or experiences that mirror their own life. These works are designed to reveal quality moments, agents and things that are worth sustaining in the everyday life of the participants, guests, and hosts.

Drawing on interviews and feedback from participants there are indications that the performative encounters can create connections and affection to the human and more-than-human world and contribute to existential sustainability of the participants by creating affective bond.

The artistic method also builds on a sustainable mind frame and is designed to minimize production and scale down the framework for the performance, not exhausting any power sources, not even my own.

The intention is to make the creation process enjoyable and free flowing.

I have used the question How Little is Enough? as a guiding light in my artistic research project, in order to reduce production and prioritize actions.

Using quality of life and existential sustainability as a point of departure, another way to frame the question is What is Needed?

The co-creators, human and non-human belong to the site, the guests and hosts are the performers, the site is the scenography of the work, and the stories generated by the different agents that intersect during the performance, are the content.

I call the artistic format relation specific performance and the method I use for generating situations and stories I call embracing and porous dramaturgy.

Since so much is already in place what I bring into the equation is the invitation to the guests and a structure for the encounters.

I use material that belongs to the sites and infrastructure that already is in place.

As an example, on the island, the sailing was organised according to the timetable of the ferry and in Pleased to meet you, a leftover bread from the nearest coffee shop was used for feeding the flock of birds on the pond.

The approach can be compared to riding a wave.

Like any surfer will know it is hard work and it requires concentration, timing, physical strength and understanding of the wave, - a whole skillset and endless practice based on observation and deep listening.

Creating work with minimal means presented a challenge.

When I had stripped the things that I thought where not needed from the production including the creative partners, and was orchestrating the whole operation single-handedly, creating and producing, caring for the ever-growing numbers of participants, I walked into a wall.

In my third performance Strings, working with more than twenty research colleagues, my energy source ran empty. I had failed to protect my own existential sustainability.

Luckily it did not affect the work, but it made me realise that in a production, the needs of everyone must be met, also the artist's. Having suffered burn out previously in my life, I took the situation seriously and sat down to find solutions. I went back to Max-Neefs list of needs and tried to understand what went wrong.

I came up with an analysis of my own artistic needs.

I am existentially sustainable when I am well nourished, physically, mentally, and spiritually. I feel purpose and I find my self in a friendly environment exchanging experiences with colleagues, family, and friends.

I then went on to make an existential claim, a manifesto that would honour my own needs so I could be existentially sustainable as an artist and as a human being.

- I need to be in touch with the things I love and that nourish me.
- I need good motivation for doing work.
- I need to stay close to my values.
- I need creative partners.
- I need practical and moral support.
- I need to be free from promoting or selling tickets while creating a work.
- I need to articulate my own needs and organise the work around them.
- I need to understand the needs of my collaborators.

- I need to share the responsibility with my collaborators.
- I need to treat creative encounters as an exchange.
- I need to enjoy the process.

By creating a taxonomy of my own needs, I have made a commitment to sustain my own energy in order to contribute to ecological development in theatre and performance.

Through my process I have understood that existential sustainability is crucial for anyone that has an ambition to contribute to sustainable development, artists, scientists, or activists. As a consequence of my findings my practice has been changing. I am developing an artistic practice that nurtures and heals using nature connection and forest bathing as a platform for transformation.

It is a practice that is yet to be developed.

A new beginning.

I am convinced that the arts have a role to play in the quest for existential sustainability but to all my colleagues I will leave you with the standard phrase from the safety rules on airplanes:

“In case of an emergency, put on your own oxygen mask before assisting others.”

[23:23]

Thanks to all participants of my work, hosts and guests. Without you there would be nothing.

[Airport Announcer Voice]

In an emergency, proceed to the nearest usable exit and leave all carry-on items behind. To speed up evacuation, jump onto the slide and move away from the aircraft.

[23:30]

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[23:38]

This article is a result of the artistic research project:

How Little is enough?

Sustainable Methods of Performance for Transformative Encounters

At Malmö Theatre Academy 2020–2024

as a part of agenda 2030 graduate School at Lund University.

Performances:

FjarVera (No Show)

By Steinunn Knúts Önnudóttir in collaboration with homeowners.

Performed in Reykjavík May – August 2020 at Reykjavík Art festival.

Eyja (Island)

by Steinunn Knúts Önnudóttir and Gréta Kristín Ómarsdóttir in collaboration with the islanders of Hrísey. Performed in Hrísey August – October 2020 in collaboration with Akureyri Cultural Company and A!Festival.

Strings

by Steinunn Knúts Önnudóttir in collaboration with members of Agenda 2030 Graduate School. Performed in Malmö and Lund February – May 2022 in collaboration with IAC and Odeum.

Pleased to Meet You

by Steinunn Knúts Önnudóttir in collaboration with a lamp, a projector, a pond, birds, and colleagues.

Performed in Reykjavík 2022 in collaboration with Reykjavík Dance Festival and Lokal, international Performance Festival. In Malmö March 2023 in collaboration with IAC.

[23:45]

How Little is Enough?

A Quest for Existential Sustainability

By Steinunn Knúts Önnudóttir

Abstract:

Existential Sustainability is a term that has recently caught the attention of scholars across the academic field e.g. sociology, health, religion, arts, and design. The term concerns systematic care and innovative means to meet fundamental human needs. In the article the term is explored through the artistic research project, How Little is Enough? Sustainable Methods of Performance for Transformative Encounters, where existential sustainability transcends all layers of the project; on personal level, in the artistic method, and in both content and format of the artistic work. The article discusses how artistic experiences can be understood as a human need and how the

four performances of the project address existential sustainability. The film deals with the driving force of change and gives a personal account of what it means to be an artist striving to be existentially sustainable.

Keywords.

Existential sustainability, Sustainability, participatory performance, immersive performance, artistic research, relation specific performance, transformative encounters, site specific performance, human specific performance, performative encounters, human needs, theatre&performance

[23:50]

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