

## Interview: Kimi Eisele

*Interviewed by Steven M. Schnell,  
Editor, The Geographical Bulletin*

Kimi Eisele<sup>1</sup> is a writer, dancer/choreographer, performer, director, visual artist, and educator based in Tucson, Arizona. Drawing on her MA in geography and a long-standing interest in place and space, she creates works that engage local landscapes, including ecosystems, political systems, and human communities. In 1997, while a graduate student in geography at the University of Arizona, she founded *you are here: the journal of creative geography*, an interdisciplinary outlet for place-based writing and art, a publication that is still going strong.

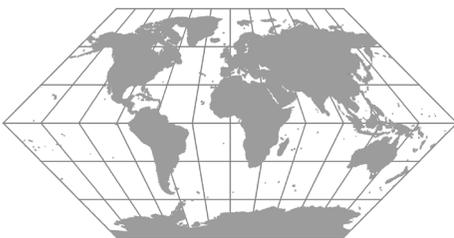


**GB: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your background, as well as an overview of what you do today?**

KE: I consider myself a multidisciplinary artist. I work mostly with words, bodies, and paper, though not usually all at the same time! One thing that ties my work together is a concern for place. I often deal with geographical and environmental themes. I also have a long track record of involving audiences and community in my projects. I generate a lot of material from community interaction and input and it's important to me to make work that addresses issues I think we can do better as a community to focus on, or celebrate, or solve. To pay the rent, I write grants to support my work, do freelance editing and writing, and conduct artist residencies in schools and communities.

**GB: You completed a masters' degree in Geography. At the time, did you plan on going on further in academia?**

KE: I got my MA in geography in 1999 from the University of Arizona. I knew I wanted to be a writer, but wasn't sure about my academic ambition. I definitely gained a new way to ask questions about the world and a new way of looking for answers. But to be honest, I think I was a little bit of a brat. I wasn't sure I was supposed to be in the



social sciences, and I found it the world of theory particularly challenging. I kept saying, how does this apply? I had a sense of urgency about problems in the world—I had just come from living in South America where poverty and environmental destruction were such a part of everyday life, it was unsettling. (Now I see those problems as part of everyday life here in America as well, of course, but at the time I was grounded in my experience on the equator.) So sitting in classes and talking about geographic thought and social theory and having to situate my ideas in the context of academic history never felt fast enough. I did the reading and tried to make sense of things, but always felt a little restrained by it all. I felt was just swimming upstream. I now see the value of that kind of rigor to a certain extent, but at the time I wanted to know about praxis and how to you apply the theory and more importantly, where was the creativity and expression? I think I was sometimes bratty because I wanted a creative outlet and didn't readily see one at first. Thankfully, despite my frustrations, I was very supported by my advisors. They gave me lots of freedom to explore my ideas and present them the way I wanted to. I'm still very close with some of them here in Tucson.

**GB: Which leads us to the next question—you founded the journal *you are here: the journal of creative geography* while a graduate student (which continues to be published more than fifteen years later). Can you tell us the story behind your involvement with the journal and its creation?**

KE: My frustration with the lack of a creative outlet led me to start *you are here*.<sup>2</sup> Because I wasn't in a writing program (and didn't really want to be), I needed a way to stay in touch with literary form. I was yearning for more accessible and practical representations of space and place and of the things that tend to excite people about geography when they first start thinking about it. Yes maps, but not just maps. Also



Kimi Eisele

our unique and personal relationships with landscapes and regions and rooms of all sizes. I also wanted to invite more people—people from beyond the discipline of geography—into the conversation about how geography plays into our lives.

When I was at Penn State as an undergraduate in the early 1990s, the grad students there started a journal called *Globehead*, which certainly influenced me. They were all very smart but also very fun and playful. I saw that such an endeavor was also a way to build community. Plus, I wanted to be rubbing shoulders with poets and writers and artists.

I continued to stay interested in how the arts connect with other disciplines. Today it seems people are looking at the intersection between the sciences and the arts, for example, and scholars have started to pay attention to the arts as an equally serious and rigorous form of inquiry. Sallie Marston and J.P. Jones, for example, have been looking these intersections,<sup>3</sup> particularly at how artists are making significant contributions to science around environmental themes. It's not just about how art can simply communicate or translate scientific knowledge, but about how artistic inquiry and practice can reveal new understandings of the world and work in tandem with science in making sense of natural and other phenomena. One great example of this Sallie recently shared with me is from the Advanced Visualization Labora-

tory, where scientists were working with large data sets and partnered with artists to help visualize the data. One particular data set was about storms and hurricanes. When the artists started rendering the data in whatever visual form they were using they came upon a second hurricane inside another hurricane. They asked the scientists, “How do you want us to handle this second hurricane?” And the scientists said, “Um, what second hurricane?” They hadn’t known it was there! It was only because of the artistic process that more information was revealed. Then both the artists and the scientists had to work together to figure out how to deal with the complex data. I love that example!

*You are here* is not specifically about art and science and those intersections, but it does provide a forum for expressions of geography that are artistic or personal, which can be profound in their own way.

**GB: The idea of place and our connections to it is central to much of your work in dance, writing, and your other projects as well - How do you see your education in geography affecting what you do today as a dancer/choreographer, writer, and visual artist? Can you describe some of your recent projects?**

KE: Once out of graduate school, I got a job working for a community arts organization called Voices. I worked with teenagers, teaching writing and photography and helping them communicate their personal and community stories. The teens came from predominantly low-income families and because of the funding we had, they also had to have an additional “strike,” meaning they were either high school drop-outs, teen parents, or had had some experience with the juvenile justice system. As if poverty wasn’t enough, right? As we wrote and photographed and started contextualizing personal experience in relationship to broader situations, we examined with the youth how sociocultural and spatial realities played out in their lives, in all our lives. In that way, I built on what I had

learned in grad school—the idea that where we live dictates so much about race, culture, class, and history, and vice versa. Now I was seeing the real-world applications of geography in my own community. I remember one time, early on in the program when I was still fresh out of grad school, I was talking to the youth and I must have been using some geo-jargon, because the teenagers I was working with looked at me and said, “Can you talk normally?” I then had to learn how to bring that academic training into the real world more smoothly, in a way that made sense to the youth.

Around that time, I started dancing again, contemporary dance and some African-influenced forms, and soon began working with New ARTiculations Dance Theatre<sup>4</sup> in Tucson. I studied dance seriously when I was younger, but took about ten years off. I wanted to incorporate community stories into the making of dances. It was such rich territory to interview people and to explore the use of story and narrative in dance on stage. I’m continually interested in the relationships between people and where they live, and in how those relationships are expressed through gesture and movement.

I also developed improvisational dance practice, and I work in a troupe of dancers and poets. Improvisation is all about paying deep attention to everything, not just our own impulses or movement, but what the people next to you are doing, where you are in space. It’s a beautiful way to dance, moving within space, that can be in fact very architectural and geographical

**GB: Your Invisible City project (described on your website as a five-week site-specific experimental arts lab) engaged numerous artists in creative works using place (downtown Tucson) as the stage. Can you tell us a bit more about this project?**

KE: In 2008 or so, Tucson had been lumbering along with their revitalization efforts. A typical Southwestern “sprawling” city, Tucson lost its downtown to strip malls and felt



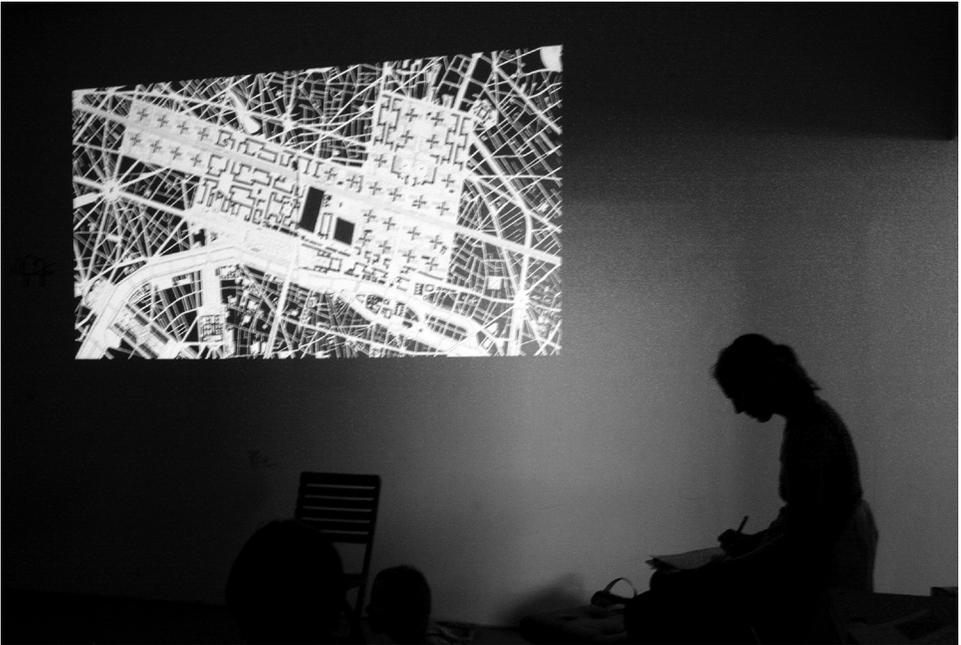
Invisible City project

very much like an invisible city.<sup>5</sup> There was investment here and there, but still a lot of vacancy downtown. We wanted to find a way to use art—specifically dance and poetry—to breathe some life into public spaces, to get people to see new possibilities. As a creative director at New ARTiculations Dance Theatre, I worked with Kore Press<sup>6</sup>, a feminist press, to gather women artists, writers, musicians, a photographer and filmmaker. We held labs for four weekends in various downtown public spaces investigating them through various artforms and co-creating ephemeral pieces about them, in them, for them. Given the lack of investment at that time, there weren't tons of people around, and therefore we didn't have many happenstance audiences. One Friday evening, however, we intersected with a zombie parade, which made for an interesting encounter—dancers mapping the streetscape with people dressed as zombies walking stiff-armed and bloodied down the sidewalk! We shared the “results” of our labs in a final performance

on top of a parking garage, which was an amazing venue, open to the sky with a huge flat surface. That performance gave audiences the opportunity to see the potential of the spaces we had worked in downtown. There was no way to measure the project's direct impact—we didn't do a survey—but I like to think our efforts and energy contributed in some way to the recent revitalization and new life in the urban core. Of course, our work was part of a larger narrative about artists helping not only to keep the city alive, but also to re-vision it. Artists are often on the front end of gentrification; they go into crappy, dilapidated areas and take risks and work to turn them into something new. In the sad versions of this story—which are all too common—they then get priced out.

**GB: How do you see the relationship between geography and dance?**

KE: Dance is about the body and movement in space. It's a beautiful medium for



Invisible City project

exploring places and our relationship to our surroundings. Moving bodies—or even still bodies—allow us to see built or natural environments in different ways. I think, too, there are probably entire gazetteers that exist in the body. Collectively we adopt gestural expressions that reveal our cultural or physical geographies. Think of Italian hand gestures or the how people in different places point differently—some with fingers, some with heads, some with chins. Many of the stories, emotions, and memories our bodies hold and express are very likely geographical. The body as atlas.

**GB: Who were the most influential geographers or works by geographers that affected the way you think about place?**

KE: I was “disciplined” into the discipline in the late 1990s with post-modernism at the fore. So, the ideas from feminists and feminist geographers about situated knowledges resonated strongly with me. My research at that

time explored the geographies of childhood, so Cindi Katz’s work was very influential. I also see a connection between my projects—which have a strong aspect of participation and of blurring the lines between researcher/artist and “subject” and of seeing broadly the inherent agency and contribution of participants—and the geographical expeditions of William Bunge, in his field expeditions into Detroit, which he made in collaboration with residents of those neighborhoods. That idea of exploring place in collaboration with others, particularly those residing there, has been an important part of what I do.

**GB: What about dancers, choreographers, or other artists?**

KE: Certainly Liz Lerman, who founded and for decades directed Dance Exchange in D.C. was tremendously influential, as well as the amazing Bill T. Jones. Both of these artists have taken on difficult and relevant subject matter, skillfully use spoken text,

and incorporate gesture and movement that comes directly from participants—often ordinary people without dance training—rather than relying solely on their own body. More recently, I'm looking at site-specific, outdoor dance practices and there are number of dance artists in the UK I'm exploring. I'm also exploring some work related to the performance of walking, including Wrights and Sites, a group of British artists who explore the idea that walking is a way of knowing a landscape and also performative. It's fascinating to think about walking as a method of research—it's movement, but also a way of being, noting, tracking, and querying the landscape. I'm also a huge fan of Michael Rohd and Sojourn Theatre and their work co-designing theater projects with non-arts sector organizations.

**GB: I just recently read the chapter from your work-in-progress in the *Geographical Review*, “The Lightest Object in the Universe,” which was part of their special issue on creativity and geography.<sup>7</sup> The chapter describes a “post-apocalyptic” (sorry to use such a clichéd term!) future after widespread failure in the systems that we’ve built our society on. How did you get interested in creating a fictional society, but one rooted in the current unsustainability of our current world?**

KE: At the time I started the book, nearly ten years ago, I was mostly writing non-fiction, trying to write essays about American exceptionalism. We were bombing Iraq and had troops in Afghanistan and, of course, we have had decades of questionable presence and coercion in Latin America and elsewhere. I was working with the notion that as a superpower, the United States does all this shitty stuff, yet here I am, a product of the privileged existence. I wasn't feeling a strong sense of patriotism, but I had privilege, and how do you reconcile that you've benefited in some way from so much exploitation and violence and imperialism? I was torturing myself with those ideas, and writing had become very un-

fun. So I decided to turn it all over to fictional characters see what they would do. When I started the project, we hadn't entered into the economic collapse yet, but I envisioned a much more dramatic collapse, asking, What if we didn't have all this privilege, all of these resources? It's an age-old theme for novelists and screenwriters, of course, but I've found that so many of the works that imagine our ruination are full of violence and doom. Of course, in a dramatic economic and energy collapse, there would be plenty of violence, but I became very interested what *else* could happen. What would happen if we were kind to one another? Rebecca Solnit's *A Paradise Built in Hell* came out during the time I was writing, and in that book she explores the way that people come together and support one another in the wake of natural or other disasters. That was a very supportive text for my work. In many ways my novel addresses how fragile all the systems we've built are, but also how resilient we might become as communities that care about each other and care about making adjustments and adaptations in the face of great loss. My purpose was not to be didactic, but to just examine this dramatic change.

**GB: What are some of the current projects you're working on?**

KE: I just finished a dance-film project with New ARTiculations called *Rosemont Ours: A Field Guide*<sup>8</sup>, which is also very rooted in place. Arizona has historically been copper country, and a new open-pit copper mine has been proposed thirty miles southeast of Tucson in an incredibly fragile desert ecosystem. The mine would use a tremendous amount of groundwater—which Tucson and outlying areas depend on—and would also impact the habitat of at least nine threatened or endangered species, including a lone male jaguar that has been photographed by USGS and U.S. Homeland Security cameras. I started thinking about how dancers might represent some of these species that we rarely get to see, as well as the more common ones.

I worked with a filmmaker to film dancers at the site of the proposed mine and nearby riparian areas that would be affected. Two musicians composed an original score for the video. What results was a “video field guide” using dancers to embody the plant and animal species. It raises questions about our role as human beings as both stewards and consumers of landscapes and resources, and about our relationship and responsibility to the species with which we share this place.

I’m working on a new dance project now in patch of Sonoran Desert within city limits called Tumamoc Hill<sup>9</sup>, home to Desert Laboratory for the study of desert vegetation. Now run by the University of Arizona, it was established in 1903 by the Carnegie Institution, and contains long-term study plots of saguaro cactus and winter annuals that have been observed for over 100 years. There’s also a paved road that winds up the steep hill and hundreds of people walk up and down the hill every day for a workout—many of whom have no idea about the history of the place or about the science that continues there today. I’m working on a series of experiments, which I’m calling “somatic” experiments (“somatic” means “of the body”). I’m using walking and moving and observing with the body as a way to explore the landscape and experience it in a new way. In one of the experiments, I stood for an hour next to a saguaro, without sitting or squatting, just standing. It was the beginning of my process to try to figure out how to duet with a saguaro<sup>10</sup> (which is now the title of the project). Up until that point this had felt kind of limiting and unsatisfying—like I was just soloing next to a saguaro. After I did the stand, I saw the saguaro as its own being, witnessing me, just as I was witnessing it. I found support in concepts put forth by object-oriented philosophers (e.g., Graham Harman), who suggest that everything—trees, rocks, sofas, rooms, etc.—has its own psyche. Eastern religions have also suggested this for centuries, so it’s not all that bizarre. Who knows if it’s true, but I like the idea of it and it helped me break through to a new way of moving with and seeing and experiencing

a saguaro. So now I’m progressing with the project. Rather than create a huge spectacle of performance on the hill—which doesn’t seem like what the hill wants or needs—the work will involve participants in additional investigations, including a group saguaro stand and a silent walk up the hill, to try to invite us to consider our place as a species among species.

## NOTES

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