

Artist Response to Coal Transitions

An interdisciplinary panel of artists including Jonas N.T. Becker (whose exhibition *A Hole is not a Void* was on view June 1–August 21, 2024 at the Wex); Tom Dugdale and Anne Cornell (contributors to the July 17, 2024 performance *Calling Hours*); and poet Julie Rae Powers shared perspectives on how creatives are responding to the global transition away from coal energy. The July 18, 2024 discussion was moderated by scholar Siobhan Angus.

This transcription is provided as a record of the live conversation, for educational use.
[Read more about the Wexner Center for the Arts' Mission, Vision, and Values.](#)

Transcript

Emily Haidet (00:00:13):

Hi, everybody. Good afternoon and welcome to the Wexner Center for the Arts. My name is Emily Haidet. I'm curator of public programs in the Department of Learning & Public Practice, and I'm pleased to welcome you to this panel conversation around Artists' Response to Coal Transitions. Tonight you'll hear from an incredible group of folks whose work has responded to changing landscapes, economic disruptions, energy extraction, and beyond. This program was conceived in collaboration with the Conference on Global Coal Transitions. Thank you, Jeffrey and Max, our colleagues in Performing Arts and the Office of Academic Affairs. Thank you everyone for your support on this program. Learning & Public Practice programs are made possible by the support of the American Electric Power Foundation, CoverMyMeds, Huntington, and the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation. Thanks are also in order for everyone at the Wex who makes all of our programs possible.

(00:01:17):

And finally, I'd also like to thank our members for their continued support of the Wex. Members, your support gives special benefits. As you know, if anyone is interested in becoming a member of the Wex, you can find information at the rear of the theater or speak to any staff member. A little bit more housekeeping before we jump in. So, following the conversation, we'll have time for questions from the audience. If you'd like to ask a question, you can raise your hand and we'll find you with a microphone. You can text the Wex hotline at 614-813-3416. We'll have a slide up at the end as well, but I'll read the number again in case you want to add it to your contacts. It's 614-813-3416. Also, after the conversation, we'll have a reception in the lower lobby just outside the theater. There will be plenty of food, a cash bar.

(00:02:15):

Thank you to the conference folks, Jeffrey, Max, and Kalia for organizing and supporting the reception. Our galleries will also remain open until about 8:00 PM, so you can check out the exhibitions, including Jonas N.T. Becker's work, *A Hole is not a Void*, which you'll learn more about during the talk. You'll likely catch Jonas in the galleries. Actually, they'll be available at 6:15 for a lightning tour for anyone who would like to jump in and hear from the artist. We'll also have educators available in the galleries who are happy to chat with you about the work. We do ask that you leave your food and beverages in the lobby. We're also pleased to be selling books

from both Siobhan Angus and Julie Rae Powers in the Wex store, two of our speakers today. We also have some incredible Smash Capital t-shirts from Jonas N.T. Becker's work.

(00:03:11):

And so, just for those of you who've registered for tonight's event—everyone in the conference was registered—You'll receive a survey in the next day. If you fill out that survey with your email address, we'll enter you into a drawing for this shirt or Siobhan's book or Julie Rae's book. So take a minute and tell us what you thought about the program, and we'll follow up with you and send you the book in the next week or so. What else? Let's see. Okay, on to the program. It's my great honor to introduce today's speakers: Siobhan Angus is assistant professor of media studies at Carleton University and a fellow of the conference on Global Coal Transitions. Jonas N.T. Becker is a multidisciplinary artist whose photographic, sculptural, and video work is on view here at the Wex in *A Hole is not Void*. Anne Cornell is the director of the Pomerene Center for the Arts in Coshocton and collaborator on *Calling Hours*, which hopefully most of you saw last night. Tom Dugdale is a director, writer, and associate professor of theater, film, and media arts at Ohio State. Also, a collaborator on *Calling Hours*.

(00:04:25):

And finally, Julie Rae Powers is a writer and artist from West Virginia and Virginia, currently living in Columbus. Please join me in welcoming Siobhan, Jonas, Anne, Tom, and Julie Rae to the stage.

Siobhan Angus (00:04:37):

Thank you, Emily, for the introduction and all the Wex staff that put together this fantastic event today. We are so lucky to be joined by four brilliant artists working across a range of media, but all deeply engaged with questions of extraction and directing our attention to the human dimension of a lot of the questions that we've been asking about coal transitions. So, before we get into a Q&A, I'm going to invite each of our panelists to spend a few minutes outlining their practice. So, to start, I'm going to invite Tom to take it away.

Tom Dugdale (00:05:42):

Okay. Hi, everybody. So yeah, I'm a writer and a director and a professor here in the theater department—theater, film, and media arts. And I came to theater actually from music, from classical music. I was training as a classical vocal performance major. And I mentioned that just because it's meant that I've always kind of had a multidisciplinary perspective on theater. I've kind of always gotten excited about it as an impure form, a kind of container that can hold lots of different kinds of artistic impulses. And I have this photograph up here, which is a really early piece that I worked on over 10 years ago now. This is a production of a play called *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder, which is usually a pretty staid, tame, but beautiful,, but tame affair. And in this particular production, we had the actors moving and dancing and picking up instruments and playing them.

(00:06:53):

So, I've just always been excited about work or working with folks who can pick up an instrument or pick up another art form in the context of theater. Here at OSU, my work has really centered a lot around new play creation and development in partnership with community. And that's what we're going to talk a little bit about today with the *Calling Hours* project at least. And I would also say about that—I guess because I've just sort of gotten a little weary of some of the

hierarchies and ancient power structures around directing and the director and been really interested in ways in which I can relinquish that power and give it up—I get really excited when these community works can find a way for the individuals from the community to contribute creatively as much as I do, if not more.

(00:07:59):

And these were just two recent pieces. One made with Portsmouth High School down in Portsmouth, Ohio, with students confronting challenges during the pandemic and what that was about. And another one with Central Ohio Symphony, which was a kind of science education meets cinematic orchestral experience going into a black hole and into the universe. And I guess just the last thing I would just mention—and this is a slide from *Calling Hours*, actually, just as a way of wrapping up here—is that I get really excited, too, about in my work trying to translate or, I would say, emotionalize or humanize, to pick up on that idea, complex academic research and try to help it through theater find a way to reach the public maybe in a more digestible or approachable format. I kind of feel like art and theater offers an opportunity to do that, and maybe we can talk a little bit more about that as we go. So with that, I'm going to hand it over to my amazing collaborator on *Calling Hours*, Anne Cornell. Let me give you the clicker.

Anne Cornell (00:09:25):

Thank you, Tom. So, my name is Anne Cornell and I'm from Coshocton, Ohio, which is the only Coshocton in the world, which leaves it both hard to pronounce and spell. It's a small community about an hour and a half northeast of here, due west from Pittsburgh. I've been there for 45 years, so I am not a native and I know that, but I am embedded. When Jeffrey brought the transition coal... Appalachian Coal Transition project and research to Coshocton and Kat Finneran is sitting next to him out there in the audience, they spurred a lot of excitement. I met Tom, to begin with, looking at the old plant. It was already closed, the power plant was closed, and then we went to this huge mountain of coal ash. This is an image, a photograph by an artist named Abram Kaplan who would take his Denison University environmental students to the coal plant every year.

(00:10:59):

And he gained access and did a lot of beautiful photographs. I don't know if you've seen them and if you saw them at *Calling Hours* or not, they were in the lobby. But I'm including this because Tom's first response was, how would we ever show the monumentality of the life and the work? And so, there's the question and I said, "Oh, why don't you come to our art park? I think we could do it there." So this is the center of downtown Coshocton directly across from the courthouse. And it was an old hotel that burned in 2005, leaving an EPA cleanup of sand and gravel and barriers. As the director of the Pomerene Center for the Arts, which was two blocks south, I was very interested in this spot and we began playing around in it just temporarily. And that led to actually funding to make it into an art park. So this is one of the hearts of my community work... is in the civic realm of looking at what is central to our community life and how to use art to address that and spur conversation around that.

(00:12:32):

The orange piece is by an artist named Bae Hyun Ha. And the community chose him to come in and do a piece, *Temporary Shelter*. It was not very much of a shelter, but oh, it was so beautiful. So, though this is not my direct work by hand, it is some of my deeply, my most creative work, I think just in the way that it has come to life. I do also do... Sorry. I do my own work. This was on

National Hugging Day, and I really had this idea that I invite the community out to play in the snow like this, but no one came.

(00:13:35):

So I had to play by myself, which I was very happy to do. Yeah, so there it is at nighttime, and there is a group by day, and it was perfect because it got very slushy and melty when I was working, so that easy to manipulate, and then it froze hard for two weeks. So, it had a life. It's really sad when you do ephemeral work and, yes, it disappears too soon. So, this was the site that we chose to present *Calling Hours* the first time a year ago May. And you can see in the background that some of Abrams's photos are hanging as banners, the crowd is gathering and that's the work that, yeah, we've spent a good deal of time on the last year and a half, the last two years... last two and a half, wherever that goes, which was deep, deep, collaborative, unsure, we did not know at all when we started where it was going.

(00:14:59):

So, work is complicated enough on your own, right? Collaborative work—when you don't even know the person—is... I'm really proud of how we came together. There are two artists in this project that are not up here. One is Michael Schmidt, who did those incredible animations, those charcoal animations. And Jonas, Tom said, "Oh, there's that quality about your photos, your coal photos, the same, like, charcoal-y, indeed, like similar material of Earth's." And not that they look anything alike, but it is such a fitting material. And with that, I would like to pass this on to you.

Jonas N.T. Becker (00:15:54):

That was great. So, I just first want to say I'm just so excited to be here talking about art and talking about my work in this context of thinking about coal transitions because I'm always just trying to find as many ways as possible to bring the arts into that conversation and think about how those two conversations can be entwined and really come together in a powerful way. So, I'm just really excited to be here in that context. I think I wanted to focus on just talking a little bit about some of the things that you'll see in the exhibition here because... it's behind me.

(00:16:36):

The exhibition, *A Hole is not a Void*, brings together 15 years of my work and practice, and I think it's six bodies of work. So, it really ranges a lot of themes and ways of working. I'm pretty promiscuous in the mediums and formats that I work in—from, sort of, hopefully hilarious, or I hope people laugh, video work to things that are very somber—But today, in the short time of introducing my practice, I wanted to focus on one of the bodies of work that I think most relates to some of the themes of the conference, and that body of work is a series of photographs, sculptures, and installation called *Better or Equal Use*. And I wanted to show this photograph first because this is where the project really started. The photographs depict former mining sites that were redeveloped specifically in sort of tracing through permitting information, specifically through SMCRA or the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977.

(00:17:42):

I've photographed the sites and then I've collected coal from the ground of each of those sites and used it, ground it up really finely, made it into a pigment and used it through an adaptation of a historic photographic printing process from the turn of the century to make a photographic tissue, and then printed each of these images with coal collected from their site. So, they're very

specific. Like, this is Federal Correctional Institute McDowell, but what you're looking at is coal. So, this is coal, this is that place. It's both.

[\(00:18:14\)](#):

And that poetic relationship was really important to me for one primary reason, which is really what the project is about, which is that... So, when I visited this site, Federal Correctional Institute McDowell and former Indian Ridge Mountain, for the first time, I was with a family friend that I grew up with. He had actually learned about the site through my dad who had taken him there in the '90s. And so, we were driving down this little road entering this facility and I just was struck. It was something that I intellectually knew, but I was just profoundly struck with this idea that this former mining site and all the issues that I had understood about extraction and reclamation was not just, sort of, a single cycle, something that happened once. It wasn't an extractive practice that happened once with the mining of coal, but it was this cycle that continued through the construction of this prison that was sitting on this site and the continued incarceration of the people who were there.

[\(00:19:09\)](#):

So, it was just a profound realization that this is not, sort of, like we can think about this issue and put our attention here... It was like, oh, we actually have to see this as this broader cycle of history, of the next 20 years, of the 20 years after that, and think about the cycle and how to stop the cycle of extraction. So, for me that was this moment of that coming together and really seeing extraction as something that was physical, as in the mineral extraction of coal; something that was economic in terms of economic development and issues around that; and then, something that was cultural in terms of especially through photography, the sort of extraction of images and culture from the region and being exported with little benefit in return. So, for me, that was really where this came together.

[\(00:20:00\)](#):

The images in their flesh are just over there, so sort of silly to show them digitally. But this is Mount Olive Correctional Complex on the former Bull Push Mountain. Nature preserve... so a number of the sites were redeveloped as a nature preserve, which is the irony is a lot. Even this, for me looking at this title, like, Nature Preserve on the former Bend Creek Mountain. Sykes Call Center on the former Chimney Mountain. A lot of the sites have been redeveloped as prisons. There are a lot of great talks today about the placement of prisons and carceral facilities on former mining sites.

[\(00:20:44\)](#):

But one of the things that was really important to me was also to point to the breadth of extractive practices. So, this call center pays minimum wage to many employees who are kept in and around 39 hours a week, so they're not required to pay benefits. So, just thinking about the broader understanding of extractive practices in terms of labor and those partnerships with government agencies. So, this is one of two bridges to nowhere where public works projects were put in place as the sort of better use of the site.

[\(00:21:23\)](#):

Lastly, I wanted to just point to one of the pieces that's a new work for the project, which is this topography, which is the last recorded topography of one of the sites in the show. So, this is the topography of a mountain that's no longer there. And I think, for me, it's really important because if you look at these titles for my work, I want it to be working in recognition of the land itself as a character and bringing that back into the space. And so, in this large-scale floor work,

that mountain that's no longer here is here in the space. I wanted to quickly show two videos. One is just a process video of me making these works because it's a really abstract thing to say that I make photographs out of coal. It can seem kind of like, "Well, what's that?" So, I don't know if we can play that and I can kind of tell you what's happening.

(00:22:40):

So, here I'm mixing gelatin together like jello. This is ground coal from one of the sites, mixing that into the gelatin. This is that black jello basically that I've made with each of the coals and I pour it out on kind of a plasticky paper. So, that's essentially how I'm making the photographic surfaces. Then the part you won't see in here, because it's light sensitive, is that I've putting a light-sensitive chemical over top of that black tissue and then taking the images that I've shot at each site and exposing them to light. And the way the works are developed is that that tissue is mated to another piece of paper and put in a pan of hot water, and then essentially anything that's not exposed just washes away. And so all you're looking at here, literally, in that pan is a sheet of paper, coal, gelatin, sugar, and that's it.

(00:24:08):

Maybe we can just skip right to the next video. So, that was kind of a deep dive, very short, deep dive into one of the series in the exhibition. But one of the things for me that was really powerful about bringing together all of this work over the last 15 years is really highlighting the relationship between the political and the personal and that those are intertwined inextricably. So, the bottom half of the exhibition is really focused on structural political, large-scale issues. And the work in the upper gallery is really about how those have these profound personal, deeply personal impacts. And it sort of culminates with this video that I made with my mom that's still in progress, but there's two scenes from the film that really explore the relationship of personal politics and generational politics, how we inherit our political beliefs. So, thinking about the generations of extraction, but in the film it's about how politics are passed down through different generations. And so, I thought I would just close with that and maybe we can just watch that.

(00:25:07):

The one thing I'll say about the *Better or Equal Use* series is I'm working on a publication and really invite any interest in collaboration. I'm going to be doing a feature on each of the sites and hoping to find interdisciplinary collaborators who are interested in thinking about or spending some time thinking about any of the sites and the projects. So, just if you have any interest in it, please find me. But I'll close with my mom.

Speaker 6 (00:26:35):

There once was a union maid, she never was afraid of goons and ginks and company finks and true and all she'd say, oh, you can't scare me. Sticking to the union. I'm sticking to the union. I'm sticking to the union. Oh, you can't scare me. I'm sticking to the union. I'm sticking to the union, til the day I die. That's a good song. See? And you can join a union, too. Well, not until you grow up. But yes, you can do that, too. Sometimes I wonder what was it all for? I mean, did it do anything? Did it change anything? Did I do enough? I mean, in the very early days, of course, I thought, "Oh, maybe we can have a revolution tomorrow."

(00:27:01):

And, you know, what did that revolution look like? Each and every one of these things that we did locally was kind of a building block and a part of building a larger movement. Certainly, there

was an active women's movement at the time and we were thinking of that, we were part of that, of changing consciousness in the whole country, in the whole world... that we were a small part of that. I guess it makes me angry that we sometimes have to fight these things again and again and again. I think back on things that they taught us, which was, "This is a very long stroke. We are not required to complete the task, but neither are we free to leave."

Jonas N.T. Becker ([00:28:13](#)):

That's a trailer. So the full thing is...

Julie Rae Powers ([00:28:18](#)):

I need the clicker.

Jonas N.T. Becker ([00:28:19](#)):

Great.

Julie Rae Powers ([00:28:23](#)):

Hi, everyone. My name is Julie Rae Powers. I'm a photographer and writer originally from the Billion Dollar Coalfields of West Virginia in Mingo County, if you guys are familiar with that. And I feel like my work operates in a similar vein to Jonas's in that the personal is political and extraction does have a devastating consequence and how deeply personal that that becomes. But I come at it from a very intimate personal narrative. The book that's in the Wexner store is the project that I'm going to talk about. It's called *Deep Ruts*. And so, essentially *Deep Ruts* is about a 10-year-long project that kind of outlines my own struggle as coming out as a queer person in an Appalachian space. But mostly what it is contending with is the stories and the narratives and the deep ruts that we tell about ourselves and about one another, whether that is stories about religion and worthiness or stories about labor and coal and things of that nature.

([00:29:41](#)):

So, I started photographing *Deep Ruts*, actually, in 2013, when I was a first year MFA student here at Ohio State, and it has just now culminated into this publication that released in April of 2024. So it's been a very long process and I think what's really great context is that... Well, first of all, I want to say it's my birthday and my partner Selena, and I were talking on the way here just about how beautifully full circle this day is today. I'm 35 and 35 years ago at 4:17 PM, I was born on a hill overlooking the billion dollar coalfields, nothing but coal cars full of coal entering and leaving this particular county that I grew up in. And now here on my 35th birthday, around that same time, I'm able to talk about coal and extraction and my artistic practice. So, that's just a really beautiful thing that's happening and I'm so grateful to be here.

([00:30:54](#)):

So, *Deep Ruts* is really about untangling what does family history mean? What does dedication to coal mean? What does it mean to grow up as a queer, artistic child to a family of laborers and homemakers, essentially? And so, that was a big question, right? Growing up they say, "Oh, well you can't be in queer West Virginia or you can't be queer near the tobacco fields in Virginia. You can't do this, you can't do that. Trans people cannot survive here," so on and so forth. And then, of course, I believe that, right? I grew up in a very small community. My family has conservative religious politics. And so, a lot of what *Deep Ruts* is about is figuring out what was my narrative of myself, but how does it fit into this large-scale monster that is coal?

(00:31:56):

I love this photograph because this is... My parents were on a coal mining tour in 1988, so just before I was born. But I locate this as sort of a photographic origin story for myself. This predates my birth. And then, while I was making *Deep Ruts*, I actually was gifted it by my father. And this is really an image that propelled the work along. As a little more context for why this is such a major conversation for me is that every man in my family, from my grandfather on. My grandfather was born in 1919, has given service to the coal mining industry. When an aunt died in 2021, I sat down at the table with them and we tallied up the collective numbers of years that the Powers family has to the coal mining industry. And it was 243 years and if you times that by 60-hour work weeks—not 40—it's something like 2 million hours underground.

(00:33:10):

And we have nothing to show for it except for broken backs and empty bank accounts. And that's part of the discussion of what does this do to family over a long period of time. And also just what's really important is that my papaw had 60 years of service to the United Mine Workers of America union. So, we're a big union family, which is deeply important. So, in a lot of my work, as you can see, the very beginning was a self-portrait as a coal miner, really asking questions about the gender dynamics of coal mining, and a coal-mining father, and this particular type of masculinity as a trans person trying to figure out what does masculinity mean to me. This particular self-portrait... it's got a weird crop to it. It's not actually like this, but it's titled *Redneck Pieta*, which in the Italian *Pieta*, it's Mary holding Jesus.

(00:34:15):

But in this particular one, you can see that I'm alone and sort of draped over the table. And this was for me, I'm not being held by a mother because of my queerness. And then I'm really interested in just objects or icons in Appalachian culture. So there's a quilt there that was gifted to me by my family, a piece of coal, and then a big block of frozen venison, and a red bandana around my neck to call to the historical Battle of Blair Mountain in West Virginia, which if you're not familiar, it's an excellent coal story. It's an excellent anticapital story, and it's a very American story that does not get shared often enough.

(00:35:06):

And then, just this last slide, I'll talk about here is an aspect of coal extraction that I think I intellectually knew, much like Jonas, but when you experience it in a very personal way, it hits a lot different. So, the aunt I was referencing in 2021 who passed away, when she passed away, she was only about 65, which is quite young, and she did have some liver issues, but the sort of thing that scaled her ultimate decline in the end was fibrotic lungs. And they completely missed a fibrotic lung. How one does that, who can say? And I asked that question and my dad said, "Well, her husband worked in the coal mines, not her, so they didn't consider any type of lung complications."

(00:35:58):

And I was like, "Well, that's really fucked up because she washed his uniforms for 20 years." So the thinking of coal, like, the simple act of coal dust when you're shaking out the clothes and putting them in the washer, how the harm of extraction comes into the home. And of course sexism and the healthcare system in West Virginia is literally 49th in the country. So another aspect of extraction to where ultimately led to, what I think, is the untimely death of my aunt. So it becomes very personal very quickly. You guys should get *Deep Ruts* in the Wexner Bookstore. The Wexner Bookstore only had 10. They're giving one away and someone already

bought one. But if they sell out, I have some on my person if you want to come find me. But thank you guys so much.

Siobhan Angus (00:37:00):

Yes, it's a beautifully produced book, so everyone definitely wants to get a copy.

Julie Rae Powers (00:37:08):

It's very beautiful. I'm very proud of it.

Siobhan Angus (00:37:10):

You should be proud. But thank you all so much for sharing this insight into your practices. There's so many amazing resonances between them, but I think what's really exciting about having you each speak alongside each other is we get... I've obviously been around geographers for a couple of days. We get these different scales of it, right? A new word for me, trying it out. But we move from the kind of this very personal dimension, the way family structures happen, the community level, and then these larger structural questions. And it seems like what each of you is very invested in is kind of opening up dialogues maybe between different groups or bringing these kinds of questions about coal and energy into spaces that they're not always in, like, museums and galleries.

(00:38:01):

So, I wonder if each of you could spend a bit of time thinking about the different scales your work is thinking through and the audiences that you're thinking about both in this moment, but you also, I think, all in different ways, raise this question of intergenerational knowledges as well. So, Julie Rae, I know it's your birthday, but I'm going to ask you to speak first.

Julie Rae Powers (00:38:23):

Okay. First and foremost, I think my audience was me for this particular project. This was about my own grief and anger and contending with family history and expectations. But the sort of audience I've gained along the way by doing this are actually peers like Jonas. We share a love of West Virginia from being from there. And just more often than not, there are no narratives of children of coal miners except for Loretta Lynn and that movie, which came out in the 1990s. But as far as sort of a contemporary tale that isn't about the devastation of the opioid epidemic, it just doesn't really exist. And so, I feel like I've been able to connect with lots of rural peers, particularly rural queer peers who almost never get to see any type of version of themselves. And I feel like it's really created... Even though the scale of it is so personal, the personal has become very widespread. I've made connections and friends with people all over the nation who say, this work is deeply resonant for me.

Siobhan Angus (00:39:43):

Does anyone else want to jump in?

Jonas N.T. Becker (00:39:52):

I was trying to pick which one of those things I was going to answer because I think the question of scale is tremendously interesting because it's like when there are different scales, we have a tendency to segregate them, think only on a large scale, or I think only on a hyper local scale.

But I think, as my mom was saying in the video, and I think community organizers kind of know this as a tried-and-true tenet, but that you have to be working on all scales. And so, I mean, I think in the way... and I think in art discussions, the idea that the political and the personal are connected is something that's, I think, deeply important to the arts because people are often, in some ways, and even if it's more abstract, working on their own histories. But I wanted to say something because you were talking about audience.

(00:40:39):

I wanted to say something more specifically about audience because it brings up a question that, I think, is really interesting, which is I think that a lot of times people, at least with my work, segregate the audiences like, "Oh, well, what do people think of your work in the Appalachian region?" As if there's kind of a difference in visual literacy or a difference in understanding of art practice. And I always think that's an interesting question, and I think... I was talking about this last night at dinner, but I think it's an interesting question because for me, growing up in West Virginia, I think the people I grew up around were some of the most visually literate and most photographed... if there's ever a group of people that knew what a photograph was and what a photograph could do, it was folks who had been photographed for, at this point, generations and generations from WPA photographers coming through, taking these pictures of rural hardship, kids in yards with no shoes, to the wave of photography during the war on poverty, to the wave of photography right after the 2016 election.

(00:41:42):

So, it's like if I ever knew a group of people that understood what the camera was, what it did, and what it meant about their identity and culture, it was the people I grew up with. And so, I always find that to be a really interesting question in terms of thinking about visual literacy and audience. I think that's what I'll say about that.

Siobhan Angus (00:42:00):

Thank you.

Anne Cornell (00:42:08):

So, the piece... We're going to talk about *Calling Hours*, yes. And the original intent of the piece came out of the research that said that folks just didn't have... When the plant closed in May of 2020, it closed during COVID. So, there was no... People were just sent home and ahead of schedule. So, there was no preparation, there were no retirement parties, there were no saying goodbyes. And we all know how tough COVID was when we didn't have to go leave our jobs for good. And so, these two major events in people's lives was tough, was very tough, and they did not have a chance to grieve. So, the original audience, basically, was the people at the plant and then giving voice to their stories and lives. So, it very quickly became a story about here are these voices, and they're so compelling, they're so interesting that the audience, and one of my favorite comments last night was "not to step on your community's stories," it was almost apologetic, "but there's a universality to these stories of loss. And indeed, we are all in transition, correct?" So, the audience grows.

Tom Dugdale (00:44:23):

All of that. And I would also add, too, just that I think the audience in a way, too, is also the performers in the piece, if it's possible to say something like that, which is a kind of strange idea if we're thinking about maybe performance in a really straight-ahead way. But in this case, it

was very sort of purgative and reparative and important for those who were telling the story to also somehow see themselves, witness themselves, feel themselves inside something telling the story, if that makes sense. So, the makers or the co-creators were audience as well. And I think that's something unique about this kind of performance.

Siobhan Angus ([00:45:17](#)):

Yeah. Thank you all for sharing that. I think in each of your practices, the incredible specificity of the histories that you're excavating, now to use an extractive term, actually kind of open up this much more universal history, which allows a lot of people to connect their own local experiences. Which brings me to a really hard question, and I apologize in advance, but many of us are here in the context of a conference on global coal transitions, and each of you have touched upon some of the ways that energy transitions impact communities. So, to ask a somewhat impossible question, can you speak a little bit to how you see the role of the arts in the context of energy transitions? What, specifically, does art do that other forms of knowledge production might not? It's a big question. I know.

Anne Cornell ([00:46:19](#)):

The start of this project coming from a research base and focusing on a community and then with the will to bring it back to the community has, I mean, opened for me who is a community... Honestly, I'm going to confess this: The plant closing was not on the top of my mind. And the chance to, jumping off of the research, to begin trying to feel how it all fit together within the community opened questions and a chance to see up close the impact. And I would say the most devastating, and I think I heard this yesterday, too, the school districts are just decimated by things like this. And it happens to be the school that my children went to, the school I'm an artist in, the schools... Tom came into the schools.

([00:47:36](#)):

So, there was this start asking, let's bring this back through a piece of theater to the community, but also for the purpose of opening conversation about policy and economic resilience. And we performed it and it was well received, and there were no leaders at the performance like all our city leaders. And it ends up, they didn't want to be looking backwards. This was after a series of many losses—this plant and that plant. And there was no feeling that this could be a way forward. But the piece is meant to say, "Hey, look, there is this amazing culture, this amazing learning culture in that plant with leaders that knew how to take their workforce that was characterized as workers on a burning ship." And that message of how to work through things like that, how to... I mean, Jiminy Christmas, we are all mortal, right?

([00:49:10](#)):

We're all dealing with this thing. And how do you take the triumph of what they were able to do and have that be a story, a way forward? So, I got to say, and Jeffrey has been incredibly generous in this because I kept saying, "Okay, Jeffrey, how is it? Where is this policy thing? Where are these conversations we've ended up? How are we going to keep this going?" And here we are at this conference and we brought a leadership team of eight people yesterday, and it feels like, oh yes, the conversations can really take hold in a way that all of the work that you do, all of your knowledge, I'm saying I am hoping we plug that in. I'm hoping that's where that goes. So yeah, that's my thought. Oh, you don't need me to hand you this.

Jonas N.T. Becker ([00:50:30](#)):

I do need to turn it on, though. Yeah, it's such a beautiful question. It's really great to just reflect on what you've just said. I think, I mean, it's interesting, I think when you asked about the question at its core is about the power, the transformative power of arts, maybe in any context, but particularly in this question of coal transitions. So for me, I think a lot about, I'm a professor at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago in addition to being an artist. And I think a lot about by doing that, I'm kind of in the business and believing in the power of art as a transformational medium. And so, it's something that I think is really important as part of this conversation. I think for me specifically, the elements that I think are the most transformational in this context are maybe two things I would identify.

([00:51:29](#)):

One of them is the fact that art—maybe I can say this as an academic—but when you write things, you say things, you're concretizing an idea, you're concretizing an opinion, a positionality, but sometimes that closes as many doors as it opens. And I think one of the things I really appreciate about working in visual, performative, creative mediums is this way that art says a lot and it also says nothing. And so, by doing that, it leaves open a lot of doors for people to understand and take away questions from what they're seeing. It's sort of, in that way. I mean, I think in a lot of my projects, I'm working as sort of a Trojan horse where you might look at one of my images and it's a landscape, but maybe what it says is something deeply political. And so, I think that that way that art can work where it invites people in who might not, in a lot of contexts, there's sort of an assumed position.

([00:52:30](#)):

So, you're giving a talk, I might assume you're from a certain background, you're going to say a certain kind of thing, and I might already be closed or maybe attending a political event. I might already assume I know what's being said. But I think the arts can really open doors in a lot of conversations because there isn't as much of that didactic quality to it. And so, I think it really opens a lot of conversations. And the goal isn't an answer, it's a question. So, I think that's quite a powerful and provocative way to think about questions where we don't know the answer.

([00:53:10](#)):

I think the other sort of... I would say really underutilized aspect of art practices and creative practices and thinking about coal transitions is most of the panels I attended as part of the conference, they end with the, "Well, hey, so that's cool. What do you think the future is, though?" question. And I think what's amazing about arts is the arts have predicted the future for years and years and years and years. So, you watch a movie from the '80s, it's got technology that we use now that wasn't in existence then. And the arts have been in the business of creating these realities that we can only fantasize and desire at this current moment. And they're brought into reality through artistic practices around the world. And in some ways, that's what art is doing all the time, is creating these imaginary realities that we aspire for. And so, I think to overlook that as part and partner of thinking about futures for reclamation, thinking about futures for coal transitions, would be remiss. So, those are maybe the two important ones.

Julie Rae Powers ([00:54:14](#)):

I'm going to follow up on you. I think the role of the arts in something like coal transitions is, art is the playground of agency and possibility. And I think a lot of everyday folks see the systemic

challenges of coal transitions and extractive economy and grief and harm as this place of impossibility. And so, when you can get those folks to participate in the arts, it's a playground for finding agency of the self, which is really important, I think. It's a one-to-one, like, I actually can do this. And it's not even really about the arts. It's about meaning making, and meaning making is very important in organizing and community, and that's the thing that connects us. And connection is going to be the thing that progresses coal transitions to something new. And we're all really talking about the human aspect. And we have to bring humanity back into industry, which is very cliché, but *Calling Hours* is a great example of the community never got to mourn something that was deeply meaningful and the politicians did not care.

(00:55:36):

And we see this is all just a repetition of American history from the jump. And clearly, us as a society have not thrived that way. And that's why we're able to come here and have this conference and this conversation about the role of the arts. And as far as the future, I feel like as an artist, I can feel the transition of the people. You all know the last time I got invited to talk to a group of geologists? Or I'm sorry, I don't know what you guys do, but... never! And it's really cool. It's really cool because I think we've all been long too separated, and we have to be communal in our conversation. So, that's what I think the role of the arts are as well.

Siobhan Angus (00:56:26):

Yeah, thank you all for these beautiful answers. But I feel like that's such a perfect way to encapsulate that. It's the ability to make connections between groups that someone might wander into a gallery, or pick up a photo book, or listen to a piece of music. And then, the transformative potential of world building, which gives us capacity to imagine things that aren't yet here, which I think is a really powerful thing that art does. I think it's probably time to open it up to audience questions. So, I have so many things I want to ask as follow-ups, but at this point, if anyone has any questions, there'll be a mic in the audience or you can text it to the hotline.

Speaker 8 (00:57:13):

So if you have a question, just raise your hand and then the phone number is right there, if you want to just text it. If you're shy, I'll read it for you. Yeah.

Speaker 9 (00:57:36):

Thanks. Hi, I am Nicole. I'm a geographer, a little bit different than a geologist. I wanted to ask them about the *Calling Hours*. If you could give us a little bit of an insight of what the reactions from community members were when they saw the piece, what you heard, and I'd be interested to know what they thought about it.

Tom Dugdale (00:58:06):

I mean, I think Anne might be the very best person to answer that, but I think cathartic was a word that was often used. One of the differences between the audience last night and the original audience might be that there were just more folks affiliated with the plant. Anne, is that fair to say? In the first production. So when the text gets to especially just really difficult aspects about losing the plant, some of the health conditions, and problems that arose from the work and the generations of labor, there was audible sobbing in the audience in Coshocton. I mean, there were real visceral emotional responses, and I think folks were quite moved. Yeah.

Anne Cornell ([00:59:20](#)):

We were very careful in constructing the script to take the script back to the people that we talked to to make sure that the voice felt like their voice, that it wasn't... Though it's put together from many voices, each one of the eulogies came from many perspectives, but one position, like the trucker or the supervisor. So, like, all of us, it was so amazing. It felt really good to see themselves back, to hear themselves back, and the recognition that it was being heard by others. And I think in a community, a left-behind community or a community that's struggling, like being seen and heard is a really important thing.

([01:00:38](#)):

And it followed on this a couple years before a BuzzFeed photographer with writers showed up and did the quintessential, "Oh, here they are, the Appalachian..." There were the fundamental religion, you know? So, that had been this national coverage of Coshocton, and it infuriated people. And so, having this authentic voice come out and people are becoming aware of how it's traveling and this conference and it went to... we took it to London, we took it to Atlanta, not as a panel, but rather than a performance, but that is central to the work and to keeping the work going, is letting the folks know that they're being heard. And hopefully that... Yeah, I don't know, hopefully what—

Siobhan Angus ([01:01:58](#)):

Hopefully.

Anne Cornell ([01:01:59](#)):

Hopefully.

Speaker 8 ([01:02:03](#)):

We got a few questions from the hotline, I think to all of the panelists. Someone asks, how do you decide the artistic medias to tell these stories?

Julie Rae Powers ([01:02:17](#)):

You should take this one away.

Jonas N.T. Becker ([01:02:20](#)):

I should. You're right. We know each other well. I love this question. This is why the suggestion was there, because for me, I work primarily lens-based media, but I see every medium that I work in as sort of a masquerade party, which is it has certain rules and audiences and materials, and they all have all of these materials. And all of these mediums have histories and context, like we spoke earlier about the history and context of photography specifically in the Appalachian region. And so each time I'm picking a medium for a project I'm playing with that, I'm saying, here are the histories, here are the contexts, here are the ways these materials are arrived at, and here are the ways that these mediums work in culture. How am I going to work with that as a material? How am I going to work with the way that this medium has had meaning and culture?

([01:03:20](#)):

And that's the material. And so, in some way, it's sort of the cultural signification of the different mediums is the way that I'm working. But that's essentially how... You'll see in the exhibition, there's a film that is made in the format of a corporate design, like a mass corporate design pitch. And it's about projecting Swiss Alps on former mountaintop removal sites. And you're supposed to laugh, so don't feel like... Please laugh. But it's like all the way from that to something that's quite somber, these really dark, tonally dark images of former coal mining sites redeveloped as crossroad facilities. So, I think that for me, it's really about understanding the cultural context of each material and medium that I'm working in and finding a way to mess it up, basically, how to... I thought a swear word first, but just how to break those rules to create a new... we were talking about thinking about the future about how to create new meaning out of these histories and stories that are told around different kinds of artistic mediums.

Anne Cornell ([01:04:32](#)):

Talk about the process.

Julie Rae Powers ([01:04:40](#)):

I think you answered that perfectly. So, I think maybe the next question.

Speaker 8 ([01:04:48](#)):

Yeah, I'm going to you in the back.

Speaker 10 ([01:04:59](#)):

Thank you. Thank you all for your work and your words right now. So many of us do community work, whether it's academics or advocates or organizers, and the nature of those collaborations are challenging, but deeply motivating and ethical. And I think this question may be more for Jonas and Julie Rae because of the collaborative nature of the *Calling Hours* is pretty clear, but everyone should speak to this. I'm just wondering, how do you see the role of collaboration in your work, especially given its kind of both deeply culturally or socially embedded nature, but also intimate? Are collaborations important to you? And what are your kind of guiding principles or ethics in how you think about collaboration? And any advice.

Jonas N.T. Becker ([01:05:49](#)):

You want to take that one first.

Julie Rae Powers ([01:05:52](#)):

Okay, this is an incredible question, I think particularly for Jonas and I and the history of photography and Appalachia as a specific reference point, because there is so much history and complexity and a lot of harm that's been done by the medium, and well, it's really ironic that's the medium. I was like, "This is mine," but it's something I'm perpetually aware of as a child of Appalachia. There is no escaping your own visual history that you did not create or opt into. And so, I think that experience, my experience, but also the sentiments of my family around being photographed or the sentiments of community members or whatever, they're never not around. And so, that is where I lead my ethics from. And I like to think that I lead from a very personal place, so I don't ask people to do anything I wouldn't do.

([01:07:01](#)):

Well, and also, you've seen two self-portraits here, but in *Deep Ruts*, there's a whole chapter where it's just, like, me naked basically. And I feel like there's a vulnerability that I require from myself as an artist that I have to still show up on that stage if I'm going to ask my sitters to do that. And then the second part is more often than not, the folks who sit for me are friends of friends or photographic colleagues who I may know from the internet, or so on and so forth. And so there's a lot of question or discussions of consent and holding space for someone to have their own agency. And to me, that's first and foremost.

[\(01:07:44\)](#):

And if my relationships dissolve after those photographs have been made, I either reach out to that person or I just simply don't use it. Photography is ubiquitous. I can make a lot of other beautiful portraits. I don't need to harm you in the process. And so, that's how I make a lot of my considerations because I don't want to be the person that harmed my own people. And a lot of the folks I work with are Appalachian or are from rural communities or just communities that are purposefully oppressed. And so, I'm not interested in repeating that dynamic, so I try my best.

Jonas N.T. Becker [\(01:08:28\)](#):

I'd say ditto that. But I guess the thing... So the question was about working in collaboration with community. Well, collaborations in general, collaborations with community, and then any advice. I mean, I would be remiss to not talk a little bit about my collaboration with my mom, which I've had a number of times. I don't have anything too deep to say about it except for I love my mom and I love working with my mom, but I think it was making the piece was the piece. And fortunately the piece you see isn't that different than what making the piece was like.

[\(01:09:14\)](#):

It's like this beautiful thing. I don't know like my mom when we were filming, so we're filming the Museum of Contemporary Arts' massive auditorium. It's a large facility. My mom was like, "You're kind of like Vermeer, I guess." And I was like, "What are you talking about mom, like Vermeer?" And she's like, "I think I finally understand." And she has this whole monologue, it's not in the film, but this whole monologue about really coming to terms with an understanding what I do and what it is that I'm doing as an artist. Because both my parents were community organizers in the Appalachian region and in various other places. But there's a meeting, there's a meeting and a melding. The collaborations that I've worked mostly with are very intimate collaborations. And in that one with my mom, it was like me deeply and intimately having an understanding of what she did and her history and also what it means to be the film...

[\(01:10:12\)](#):

I shot the film very recently. It's a really new piece. She's 80. And so it's also a piece that's about what it means to be near the end of your life and realizing what a lifetime of activism has meant and what does it mean, what has it contributed, what has it created as a legacy in terms of generational legacy. And so, it's like me understanding what it means to age, what it means to be involved in a community, and her understanding what it means to be me and be an artist and be a parent, a new parent. So I think in those ways it's like you just have this inherent motivation through the making and creation of the work to understand each other in a deeply profound way.

[\(01:10:51\)](#):

I have a close relationship with my mother. I thought I'd understood her before, but it was a new level of that. In terms of working with community, I think the other thing I just wanted to touch

on, and I think especially in this context, something that I encounter a lot working in the Appalachian region is a sort of gatekeeping of who can and who can't have something to say or participate. And I think one thing that I've thought a lot about being an artist is that there are all kinds of communication and all kinds of work and all kinds of participation that are important. And so, whether you're somebody that has been embedded in a community for millions and millions and millions of years, or somebody who's... I think one of the gifts that art has to offer in some ways is a slightly abstracted perspective and one that can be a reflective perspective.

(01:11:46):

And sometimes I think that that's really important, especially in and around community organizing, whether it's the very specifics like who are your individual relationships, what are the specific policies? And sometimes that sort of abstraction can be really important. But I think the main thing that I've thought a lot about is just that it's important to value all voices and obviously recognizing where we come from. Somebody who's sort of flown in from BuzzFeed can feel really violent and aggressive in their position. But also I think that there's, I don't know, a positive one, maybe I'm wrong that we don't need to value all voices, but I do think it's important to value all voices who are sort of earnestly met and intended. There's something in there, but I think that just sort of seeing over the years, these sort of gatekeeping of at what point or at what moment is a perspective valued, I think it can be helpful to kind of broaden that conversation.

Emily Haidet (01:12:54):

So, I think we're out of time today, but we do have a reception to follow. So hopefully all of our speakers will continue the conversation over some food and some drinks. But let's—

Jonas N.T. Becker (01:13:09):

6:15.

Emily Haidet (01:13:10):

Yes, Jonas will be at the entrance to the galleries at 6:15 for anyone who'd like to walk through with them and hear a little bit more. But let's give all of our speakers a round of applause. And again, thank you all for coming. The reception will continue until seven o'clock. Galleries will be open until 8. Thanks again.