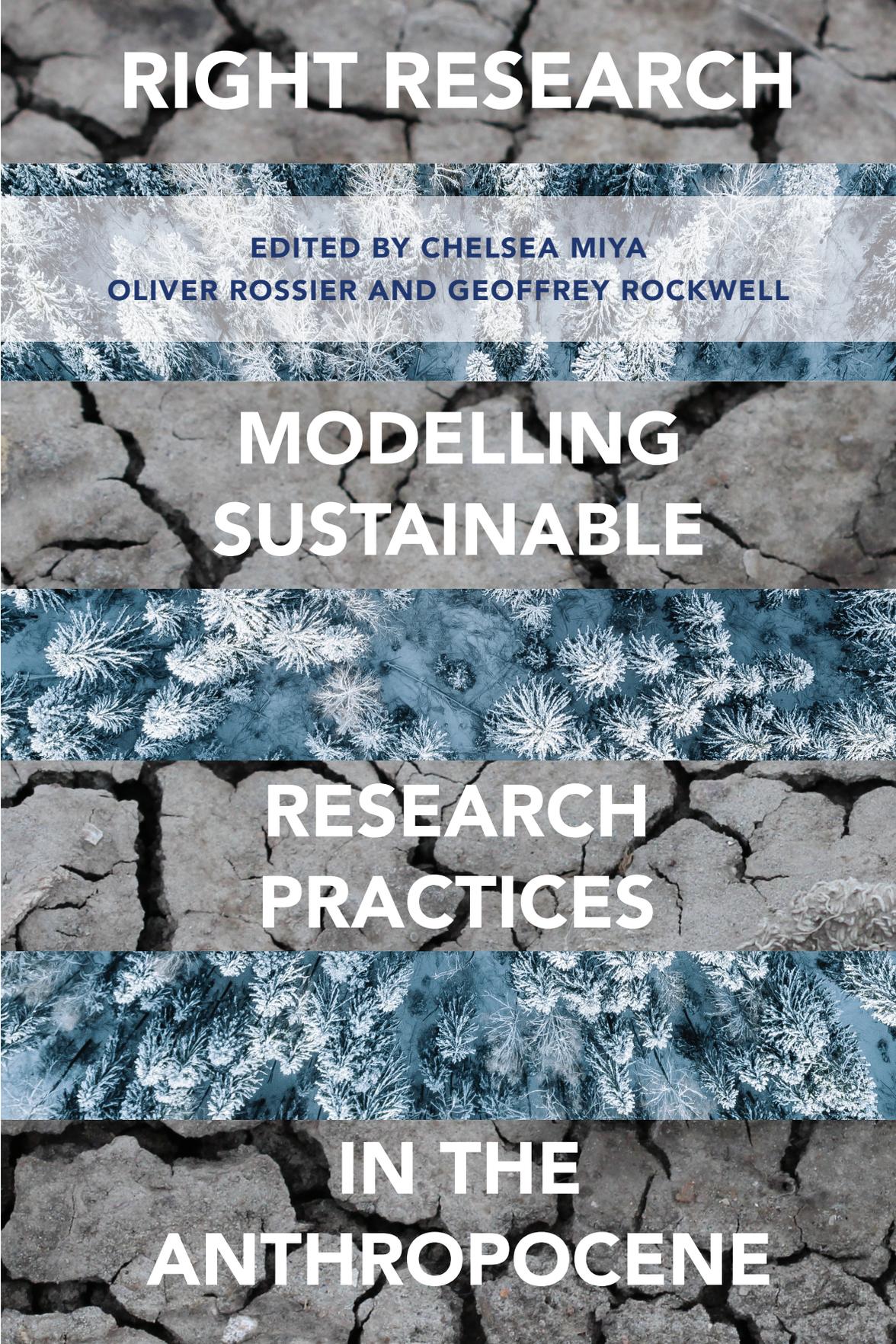


# RIGHT RESEARCH



EDITED BY CHELSEA MIYA  
OLIVER ROSSIER AND GEOFFREY ROCKWELL

## MODELLING SUSTAINABLE

## RESEARCH PRACTICES

## IN THE ANTHROPOCENE



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## Nurture/Future/Sculpture

Christa Donner



Fig. 6 *Conversations about the Future*, ink on polypropylene on window. Christa Donner, 2015.

The language of sustainability is used to describe a sensibility of shared ecological values, inspiring new tools to mitigate the harm that humans inflict upon our own planet. These days you can find an endless supply of ‘green’ products that are both innovative and familiar, allowing consumers to pursue a comfortable lifestyle while reassuring them they’re doing something nice for the world. This approach is premised on the idea that humans are the ones in charge here, that we are an inherently aggressive and invasive species tamed through the possessions we choose to buy. Of course, we are more vulnerable than we like to believe, and none of this is especially ‘sustainable’ in the long run. My own working definition of sustainability requires an investment in relationships built among the complex network of organisms that live in and around us. It is a messy, slow process of inquiry, failure, and mutual respect. When considering how humans can live in balance with the ecosystems we so heavily rely on, what role can artistic practice play?

If we are to find a way forward, we will need to do so with creativity, and with care. When I say ‘care’ here, I mean carefully, but also with respect to those who care for others, whose knowledge and labor

have always been devalued by capitalist culture. Giving care greatly expands our capacity for improvisation and creative problem-solving, both critical resources in this time of rapid change. Creative caregivers can play many roles in reimagining and redefining sustainability. Some of us are already doing and living this in interesting ways, both public and private.

As an artist, I move between the imaginative space of the studio and more social, hands-on engagement. I use painting and drawing to propose speculative systems, often borrowing models from other organisms to investigate what we can learn from them, and how we might co-evolve. While drawing tends to be a solitary activity, I approach it as a collaboration with many 'future foremothers', working across time and space to shape a new domain. These foremothers are writers, artists, and activists, some well-known and some less so. They include the Buddhist environmentalist Joanna Macy, who facilitates conversations with beings two hundred years in the future, the writer Marge Piercy, whose work proposes a holistic restructuring of society after environmental and economic collapse, and my daughter, Stella, who has radically altered my relationship with the natural world and with time itself. I translate what I learn from these foremothers not only into drawings but also toward workshops, interview-based projects, and guided visualizations that aim to activate intergenerational empathy and collective problem-solving.

This process extends to my work as a parent, and as a college educator working with themes of care and sensory experience in my classes. Raising a child and institutional teaching are not activities that we typically consider 'art', partly because they're so personal and intimate in scale—but I recognize them as part of the larger creative practice of modeling systems I hope to see in the world. Caring for the next generation has changed my relationship with the past and the future, compelling me to speculate beyond my own lifespan and to consider my role more carefully. If I involve my daughter in the process of growing and composting things, it makes these processes visible, accessible and integrates them into her larger world view. I consider this a sort of ecological form, one which may—or may not—be disseminated further, holding the potential to grow and evolve as others pass it along.

Most recently I've been taking my interest in social sculpture<sup>23</sup> and nature-based adventure playgrounds into some practical, hands-on work with my community. We've been working to create situations where—even in the middle of an intensely urban place like Chicago—future generations can develop an ongoing relationship with nature. When young people explore the natural world on their own terms, they develop new skills and create potent sensory memories. They become more mindful members of the local ecosystem. If we're lucky, some of these children may become future stewards of the environment. This broader ecological form feeds back into my more speculative, studio-based practice, and vice versa. As artists and scholars, as parents, as people, we play a critical role in transmitting information from the past and the possible future to the next generations, who will help shape what is to come.



Fig. 7 *Saying goodbye*, digital photograph. Christa Donner, 2018.

23 Social sculpture is a term coined by the twentieth-century artist Joseph Beuys. See Allison Holland, *Joseph Beuys and Rudolf Steiner: Imagination, Inspiration, Intuition* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2007); Carin Kuoni, *Joseph Beuys in America: Writings by and Interviews with the Artist* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990); Shelley Sacks, 'Social sculpture and new organs of perception: New practices and new pedagogy for a humane and ecologically viable future', in *Beuysian Legacies in Ireland and Beyond*, ed. by Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes and Victoria Walters (Münster: Lit, 2011), pp. 80–97.